PYRAMID ON THE PRAIRIE: THE SAFEGUARD PROGRAM AND THE PRIMACY OF POLITICS IN THE FEDERAL BUDGET PROCESS

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PYRAMID ON THE PRAIRIE: THE SAFEGUARD PROGRAM AND THE PRIMACY OF POLITICS IN THE FEDERAL BUDGET PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

The debates over the power of the purse in the Revolutionary era show that the Founders valued democratic responsiveness over efficiency. Inefficiencies and failures occur not because federal budgeting is inherently political, but rather because the politics themselves are imperfect. To the Founders, a budget system driven by politics is a goal to be sought, not a problem to be solved. Moreover, even the most well-planned process reform cannot overcome flaws in the broader political sphere. In this thesis, a qualitative historiography of the political debates over missile defense programs from World War II through 1975 (including Nike-Zeus, Nike-X, Sentinel, and Safeguard) is used to illustrate Aaron Wildavsky’s concept of incrementalism, which describes the post-war period as a classical era of budgeting where a small group of experts negotiated incremental changes from a well-established consensus position on an annual basis.

From the Second World War through 1960, Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) research and development was driven primarily by the imperatives of organizational politics in a Department of Defense suffering from interservice rivalries. Through 1967, the issue was caught up in Robert McNamara’s efforts to centralize power in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Finally, in the era of Safeguard, from 1967 through 1975, the future of missile defense was primarily debated by Congress. Because Safeguard, the first
ABM fielded by the United States, was cancelled just one day after achieving Full Operational Capability, it seems to showcase how short-term political pressures create obstacles to long-term budgeting in the Department of Defense. But Safeguard also led the Soviet Union to enter into the SALT arms control talks, which led to the ABM Treaty and the primacy of Mutually Assured Destruction, the preferred American strategy for the Cold War.

No responsible strategist would plan a process that proceeded quite like Safeguard and its predecessors, but the debates over deployment accomplished America’s strategic goals, however indirectly. For that reason, the Safeguard story uniquely illuminates the interplay between the budget process and American democracy. Throughout the full period, incremental changes were negotiated over time. While there were inefficiencies, they were not the fault of the process. As Wildavsky says, the process is only an arena in which political battles are fought. If we seek more efficient government, it is politics, not process, that will have to change.
No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

― Winston Churchill

Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.

― H. L. Mencken
The remnants of the Safeguard program cast a surreal shadow on the landscape near Langdon, North Dakota (fig. 1). When construction began in 1970, the North Dakota installation brought the region 40 to 50 percent growth in population, retail sales, and employment. Personal income doubled. And then, after just five years, it all went away, leaving behind two small installations and a handful of empty silos as the only reminder of the boom times.
The first of the installations, the Perimeter Acquisition Radar Characterization System, or PARCS, was designed to find and track Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) as they streaked through space over the North Pole. It remains in operation today as part of Air Force Space Command. At Cavalier Air Force Station, just 20 miles from the Canadian border, the 10th Space Warning Squadron monitors space junk, satellites, and other objects in orbit around the earth. The building’s vast server racks now sit mostly empty, since vacuum tubes took up a lot more space than microchips. But the technology still lags: the computers may use modern operating systems, but only to run emulators that mimic 1970s programs designed to be operated with light pens. It is from here that the United States observed the first Chinese anti-satellite test – an irony for this legacy of Safeguard, since the United States used the system’s missiles for its own tests nearly half a century prior.

The second facility, the now-abandoned Missile Site Radar, or MSR, was responsible for tracking ICBMs as they neared the United States and guiding Spartan and Sprint interceptor missiles to their targets. This facility, along with spread-out Remote Sprint Launcher missile fields, was decommissioned quickly after the program’s cancellation. It was held in caretaker status by the Army Space and Missile Defense Command until the United States unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002. At that point, the system lost its last residual value: it was held in caretaker status only because it was the only site allowed under the terms of the ABM Treaty. The property was declared as surplus. Today, a coalition of interests led by the Cavalier County Job Development Authority is pursuing new uses for this abandoned pyramid on the prairie.
I have had the unique opportunity to tour the PARCS array and the grounds of the MSR facility through my work as the defense budget analyst and military legislative assistant for the Senate Budget Committee Chairman, Senator Kent Conrad of North Dakota. Unfortunately, indoor tours are nearly impossible due to flooding – even nuclear-hardened concrete can be worn down by the harsh North Dakota winters if left untended for decades. The PARCS array feels remote and a bit outdated, but the commander’s mission brief makes clear that its daily operations remain critical not only to the national security of the United States, but to the future success of any space-faring nation.

The MSR, on the other hand, feels like a relic of an ancient civilization – almost like what might be left behind if its mission of deterrence ultimately failed. It is almost impossibly eerie to stand on the remnants of cracked concrete and steel poured in the middle of wind-swept prairie knowing that this structure was built to intercept incoming 25-megaton Soviet nuclear weapons with five-megaton American nuclear weapons so that one- or two-megaton American weapons could successfully be launched at targets within the Soviet Union. This is the epitome of the terrifying prisoner’s dilemma of Cold War-era game theory. The only thing more sobering is the realization that it was designed and built with the knowledge that the USSR already had something like it (and Russia still does: the Soviet version, which rings Moscow, remains operational).

It was there, standing mouth agape in a field of prairie grass outside Langdon, pondering the logic of the ancient civilizations of the Cold War, that the topic of this work – and hopefully of many future studies – was determined. This vision was too eerie, and yet its purpose too important, to be left as a relic of the past. I hope this text will
begin to do this topic justice. Though Safeguard is used here only as a case study in the
examination of broader questions about the role of democracy in federal budgeting, there
are many other angles from which to approach the topic, many of which are mentioned in
footnote asides throughout the text. It is my hope that I will have the luxury and joy of
pursuing them in years to come.

In closing, I would like to thank those who made this work possible: Georgetown
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INTRODUCTION

Since President Bill Clinton declared the era of big government to be over in his 1996 State of the Union address, American politicians of both major parties have rushed to top one another in denouncements of “business as usual in Washington” and calls to eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse. Underlying this rhetoric is the premise that poorly-planned projects, redundant agencies, and unfulfilled goals are symptoms of a disease that can be cured. If only the United States had more effective leaders, these campaigners insist, things would turn around. Myopic short-term decision-making would be replaced by deliberate and effective long-term planning. Reactionary knee-jerk politics would be superseded by thoughtful and reasoned dialogue. Flush with renewed enthusiasm about such fantastic claims, voters rush to the ballot box every two years to “throw the bums out” and replace them with the next big thing: the candidates who can fix what’s broken – for real this time. Yet it never seems to work.

It seems obvious that consistent Congressional attention to short-term political pressures over long-term strategy creates obstacles to planning and budgeting in the government. To mitigate that issue, reformers advocate systems of budgeting that would better insulate decisions from day-to-day political pressures. Longer-term budgeting has been a goal of efforts to reform the budget process dating back to the earliest days of the Republic. Some of the early changes were made due to necessity: the nation’s quick expansion of territory and growth in population quickly overwhelmed the ability of the Congress to appropriate funds with the level of specificity originally imagined: literally down to desks and quill pens. Later, the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 centralized
power that had been diffused within the burgeoning federal bureaucracy into the office of the President and the new Bureau of the Budget (now the Office of Management and Budget, or OMB). Then, in response to decades of growth of presidential power, the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 was passed to restore the power of the purse to the legislature, where it originated.¹ The logic underlying each reform was the perceived need to make the budget process better serve the American people by making it more orderly and efficient – and more centralized, particularly in the executive branch.

While the advantages of making planning and strategy the primary drivers of decision-making are obvious, there is reason to question the wisdom of making them paramount. The Founding Fathers were actually far more concerned with whether the system they were constructing would be responsive to the people than how efficient it would be. That is why all revenue and appropriations legislation are required to originate in the House of Representatives, the most directly democratic of the federal institutions. As James Madison explains in Federalist 58, the power of the purse is “the most complete and effectual weapon with which any constitution can arm the immediate representatives of the people, for obtaining a redress of every grievance, and for carrying into effect every just and salutatory measure.”² The result is that the budget is often used by Congress for political rather than strategic purposes. Yet, as was eloquently argued by political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, that is not a “bug,” but a feature – a built-in check


against an imperialist executive and an entrenched bureaucracy. To the Founders, the notion of reforming the system to give unelected officials the power to ignore or even directly contradict the will of the voters would be antithetical to the ideas that gave birth to the nation. This begs the question of whether it is possible to achieve successful budget process reform without upending the democratic balance of power outlined by the Founders.

An excellent case study illuminating the interplay between the budget process and the principles of American democracy is the story of the Department of Defense Safeguard Program, the first Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system fielded by the United States – and cancelled just one day after achieving Full Operational Capability. At first glance, Safeguard proves the flaws of short-term, politicized decision-making. The system was the fruit of a decades-long research program that began shortly after World War II and kicked into high gear in the late 1960s after the Soviet Union deployed its own missile defense system and the People’s Republic of China announced that it had developed nuclear weapons and had begun work on an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program to deliver them. Combined with the persistence of the Army and unflagging support from some conservative politicians, these developments were enough to secure a 51 to 50 Senate vote in favor of deployment, with Vice President Spiro

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4 The term Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) system was used to describe systems designed to defend against ballistic missiles until the 1980s, when the Reagan Administration began using the term Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) to distinguish its Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal and other missile defense efforts from systems prohibited by the ABM Treaty. After President George W. Bush announced American withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2001, the term National Missile Defense (NMD) came into vogue in order to differentiate larger systems from theatre or tactical defense systems like Aegis.
Agnew breaking the tie. At the same time, the United States was laying the groundwork for arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) process. Those talks concluded in 1972 with the ratification of the ABM Treaty, which limited each nation to just two sites – one protecting the national capital region, and one protecting a missile field. A 1974 protocol limited each country to its one existing site, rendering Safeguard nearly irrelevant. As a result, the vote to cancel the program in 1976 was not nearly as close as the 1969 vote to deploy. It seems to be about as clear-cut of a case of a boondoggle as one can find.

The case study of Safeguard and the programs leading up to its deployment is particularly useful because the three-decade span offers three distinct periods to study. In the early years, from the end of World War II through the Kennedy Administration, research and development of missile defense systems was driven primarily by the imperatives of organizational politics in a Department of Defense suffering from fierce interservice rivalries over budgetary resources and emerging roles and missions. During most of the 1960s, the issue was caught up in Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara’s efforts to change his role from referee of interservice disputes to leader of a unified Department of Defense. Finally, in the era of Safeguard, from 1969 to 1975, missile defense was a political football in a country torn asunder by the Vietnam War and Watergate. Conditions in this last period seem to be the least conducive to efficient decision-making, and the decaying monument of hardened concrete and steel on the plains of North Dakota appears to make that case in point.

While Safeguard appears to be a failed program that never should have emerged from the research and development stage into procurement, or should not have been cancelled before the technology could be harvested for future programs, there is another way to view the Safeguard story. From another vantage point, Safeguard was a worthwhile investment for an entirely different reason. The Soviet Union refused to enter into arms control talks until the Senate approved the deployment of Safeguard. The ABM Treaty negotiated through the SALT talks formalized the primacy of the American Cold War strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction, rather than the stalemate between offensive and defense forces that the Soviet Union would have preferred.

The reality falls somewhere between those two perspectives. Safeguard helped lead to the SALT talks, which benefited America; at the same time, it is evident with the benefit of hindsight that cheaper and easier solutions were available. Politics were paramount and strategy receded into the background – not lost, but secondary. But despite these inefficiencies, the end result was positive: the deterrence of nuclear war through offensive systems, the preferred strategy of the United States. Moreover, the Safeguard enterprise was the result of direct democratic attention, and the decisions made ultimately reflected the will of the American people. The crux of the issue is that the history of the Safeguard program is hardly what one would have planned in an ideal world – but, through the back-and-forth passions of politics, it ultimately accomplished the strategic goals of the United States. To the extent that improvement may be possible, it is only through changing the nature of politics, not process.
CHAPTER 1
THE POWER OF THE PURSE

The United States is a country birthed from opposition to excessive executive power. In the aftermath of the Revolution, the dominant theme undergirding the philosophies and writings of the Founders is the fear of tyranny. And while the federal budget may frequently be seen as an arcane and tedious accounting exercise, it is in fact a key instrument of power. Through the budget, priorities are assigned, new programs are created and old ones eliminated, and the role of the government in the lives of its citizens is determined. The British struggled for centuries to establish the principle that the Parliament, not the monarch, should decide how much to tax and spend.1 By colonial times, the idea was well-ingrained in Americans as well. The result was that the colonies used their limited power over the purse to keep royal governors in check, with salaries voted annually, excises and import duties renewed on a yearly basis, and appropriations specified for precise purposes and amounts.2 The revolt over the Stamp Act and the Boston Tea Party are seen as tax protests, but more broadly they were about power.

This conception of the budget as an instrument of power continued through the Revolutionary era. During the debate over ratification of the new Constitution in New York, Anti-Federalist Melancton Smith attacked Alexander Hamilton’s arguments in favor of ratification by complaining that the power of the federal government had been “Extended to every thing dear to human nature . . . for that power which had both the

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1 Schick, *Federal Budget*, 10.

purse and the sword, had the government of the whole country, and might extend its powers to any and to every object.”

The Founders of the Constitution believed that the power of the purse would be the most important authority assigned in the Constitution, for all other powers flow through it. To the Founders, the budget—the sources of revenues and the direction of expenditures—was everything. And it would be carefully considered.

The Founders and the Budget

The Constitution itself is a product of the early budget process. There was near unanimous agreement in the young United States that one of the most significant shortcomings of the Articles of Confederation was the failure to provide sufficient means for the federal government to raise revenue. In Federalist 12, Hamilton claims that a nation “destitute” of revenues “must resign its independence, and sink into the degraded condition of a province. . . . Revenue, therefore, must be had at all events.”

Even Anti-Federalists conceded that the need for a Constitutional Convention to amend the Articles was real: the minority against ratification in Pennsylvania published a statement that readily acknowledged that “Congress found themselves incapable of complying with their engagements, and supporting the federal government. It was found that our national character was sinking in the opinion of foreign nations.”

Yet, things were not so bad as to require a new Constitution. The Anti-Federalist known as “The Federal Farmer”

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5 “The Address and Reasons of Dissent of the Minority of the Convention of Pennsylvania to their Constituents, December 18, 1787,” in Anti-Federalist Papers, 238.
argued the country was “in no immediate danger of any commotions . . . and our government answer all present exigencies, except the regulation of trade, securing credit, in some cases, and providing for the interest, in some instances, of the public debts.”

Those at the Constitutional Convention knew they were charged with finding the proper balance between the federal government’s power to raise appropriate revenue and the risk that this power might subvert the will of the people and lead to tyranny. Different parties would place the fulcrum in different places. The Virginia plan for amending the Articles of Confederation did not address the issue at all, relying on the text of the original Articles to raise revenue. The New Jersey plan was the first to address the federal budget. It would have authorized the Congress to raise revenue by levying duties and tariffs on goods, and by making requisitions in proportion to population. Hamilton advocated for a stronger central government, noting that the New Jersey plan’s provision for the federal government to raise revenue was a good one but that the provision allowing it to requisition additional funds from the states on the basis of population was doomed to failure due to economic inequality between them. His proposal would not grant specific revenue-raising authority, suggesting that it was granted by the broader authority of Congress to pass “all laws whatsoever.”

When the Convention charged a committee with producing a draft of an entirely new Constitution, it received a document that sketched out the rough outlines of the provision requiring all revenue and appropriations legislation to originate in the House of

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7 “The New Jersey Plan, June 15,” in Anti-Federalist Papers, 63.

8 “Plan for National Government, June 18,” in Anti-Federalist Papers, 74, 78.
Representatives. The draft had an additional restriction to ensure the process remained as democratic as possible: the Senate would be prohibited from amending or altering the bills.9 Of course, the final provision shifted back in Hamilton’s direction, granting Congress “power to lay and collect taxes, duties, imposts and excises [and] to pay the debts and provide for the common defense and general welfare of the United States.” This was a compromise that the Anti-Federalist “Brutus” found unacceptable: “I consider the clause which gives the house of representatives the right of originating bills for raising a revenue as merely nominal, seeing the senate be authorised to propose or concur with amendments.”10

Demonstrating the widespread understanding of the power of taxation, a primary concern during the state ratification debates was that the federal government would subvert the states’ ability to raise revenues. Massachusetts and Rhode Island proposed amendments to require the federal government order requisitions from the states before seeking revenues via its own methods.11 Virginia proposed a similar amendment to require Congress to provide each state with a required revenue quota, allowing the state legislatures to determine independently how the quota would be met.12

For the citizenry, the issue went beyond the question of federal jurisdiction. Taxation is a burden on the people regardless of where or how it is levied, and the real


12 “Additions Proposed by the Virginia Convention: Amendments to the Constitution, June 27, 1788,” in Anti-Federalist Papers, 222.
issue is how much revenue will be raised and for what purposes it will be spent. With tremendous foresight, “Brutus” got to the crux of the issue:

It is said, by some advocates of this system, “That the idea that Congress can levy taxes at pleasure, is false . . . . in the very clause which gives the power of levying duties and taxes, the purposes to which the money shall be appropriated are specified, viz., to pay the debts, and provide for the common defence and general welfare.” I would ask those, who reason thus, to define what ideas are included under the terms, to provide for the common defence and general welfare? Are those terms definite, and will they be understood in the same manner, and to apply to the same cases by every one? No one will pretend they will. It will then be matter of opinion, what tends to the general welfare; and the Congress will be the only judges in the matter.13

The Federalist papers are conflicted on what the term “general welfare” might include. In Federalist 30 and 34, Hamilton suggests a broad interpretation of the phrase, mentioning expenditures for “support of the national civil list” and “the encouragement of agriculture and manufactures.”14 Madison directly refutes “Brutus,” saying that “no stronger proof could be given for the distress under which these writers labor for objections, than their stooping to such a misconstruction” as to suggest the clause could be abused. “For what purpose,” he asks, “could the enumeration of particular powers be inserted, if these and all others were meant to be included in the preceding general power?” Madison closes his case by pointing that the phrase was lifted directly from the Articles of Confederation.15

Where the two Federalists agreed was that that Congress was to be representative of the people, and that the real meaning of the term would therefore be determined by the


electorate over time. In Federalist 35, Hamilton argues the House of Representatives will represent the interests of a wide swath of society with regard to revenues, asking:

Is it not natural that a man who is a candidate for the favor of his people, and who is dependent on the suffrage of his fellow-citizens for the continuance of his public honors, should take care to inform himself of their dispositions and inclinations, and should be willing to allow them the proper degree of influence upon his conduct? . . . [These] are the strong chords of sympathy between the representative and his constituent.¹⁶

To this day, those who would reform the budget process to be more technical and those who continue to believe in the value of a responsive legislature also agree: the Congress, for better or worse, is more subject to political influence than the executive.¹⁷

_A Brief History of American Budgeting_

In the first century of the United States, the budget was small – microscopic, by modern standards – and it was generally understood that, excepting borrowing in times of national emergency, spending ought not exceed revenue. Thrift and self-reliance were virtues in the young Republic.¹⁸ This was such a universal truism that Hamilton, as the first Secretary of the Treasury, simultaneously proposed that the federal government assume the debts of the states (to strengthen the central government) and then “bring the expenditure of the nation to a level with its income,” for without achieving a balanced

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budget, “the finances of the United States will never wear a proper countenance.”¹⁹ This was not to say that the U.S. ought not have debt, but rather that it must run a surplus or balanced budget and adequately service the debt in good times so that a line of credit would remain available in bad times. From 1789 through 1916, the budget was in balance or surplus two-thirds of the time, with most exceptions in times of war or recession.²⁰ When power shifted from Federalist Presidents George Washington and John Adams to the Democratic-Republican President Thomas Jefferson, this belief in the importance of a balanced budget was strengthened, with a new focus on more frugal government added on top. Jefferson went so far as to halt construction on several naval vessels shortly after taking office – the young nation’s first instance of politics trumping military plans.²¹

This sort of back-and-forth over the proper size and role of the government became the norm, but within tight constraints. In keeping with the common understanding of the body politic that government ought to be small, budget battles were relatively minor in scope through the 19th century. When Democrat Andrew Jackson defeated Republican John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828, he decried Adams’ $1 million in federal expenditures for internal improvements like roads and canals as unconstitutional. The debate would continue for decades between the Democrats and their opposition, whether Republican or Whig.²² Regardless of which party was in charge,

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²² Ibid., 30-33.
however, expenditures remained focused on a limited set of services – virtually none the type of programs understood to benefit the general welfare today. At the turn of the 19th century, appropriations were made for specific costs like $3,500 for candles and firewood in Treasury offices or $4,400 for moving books from Philadelphia to Trenton. In total, just $1.4 million of the government’s $10.8 million budget funded civil expenditures and federal pensions, with $6 million dedicated to the Departments of War and Navy and the remaining $3.4 million set aside for interest. At the eve of the Civil War, in 1860, civil expenditures and federal pensions had grown to $19.2 million of a $53.2 million budget, still a much smaller share than the War, Navy, and Indian budgets, which totaled $30.8 million. The remaining $3.2 million was for debt service.

These constraints on the federal budget were removed during the Civil War, and expenditures never returned to these low levels. This was largely in reaction to political pressures: the South had to be rebuilt, the rest of the country wanted its fair share of new infrastructure, and military adventurism was increasingly attractive politically. The problem was also in part an organizational issue. President Abraham Lincoln justified a significant expansion of executive power on the grounds that the war necessitated it. Congress split jurisdiction over spending and revenue bills, previously united in the House Ways and Means and Senate Finance Committees, by creating the Appropriations Committees. Jurisdiction was further diluted when the authorizing committees were permitted to write some of the most costly and politically popular bills, including those


for internal improvements and the military.\textsuperscript{25} This hodgepodge made coordination between the executive branch and Congress more challenging, as each department prepared its own requests and submitted them directly to committees of jurisdiction. The only executive coordination was the compilation of a \textit{Book of Estimates} each year by the Department of the Treasury. The result was the end of the balanced budget: 11 of the 17 years from 1894 to 1910 saw deficits. Even the creation of the federal income tax (a move that required a constitutional amendment) was not enough to stem the red ink.\textsuperscript{26}

It was here for the first time that the arguments of federal budget reformers began to gain traction. Reformers criticized the practice of making detailed line-item appropriations, arguing that granting the executive branch more discretion to make changes or transfers within a budget year would allow for more efficient spending. They believed that empowering the President with a new Bureau of the Budget to coordinate budget requests would give the President’s request more authority and limit the power of political party heads and committee chairmen to manipulate the system for their own ends. After years of debate and struggle, the fruit of their efforts was the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921. The bill made clear that the President’s request was only a proposal, and that the real budget would still be written in Congress. In place of informal collaboration between executive departments and committees of jurisdiction, a formal system was created: the President proposes and Congress disposes.\textsuperscript{27} But even with that caveat, the legislation still represented a major step toward the centralization of budget

\textsuperscript{25} Wildavsky, \textit{New Politics}, 31-32.

\textsuperscript{26} Schick, \textit{Federal Budget}, 14.

\textsuperscript{27} Wildavsky, \textit{New Politics}, 33-34, 36, 38.
authority in the executive branch, and epitomizes the tendency of reformers to focus more on the virtue of efficiency than that of democratic responsiveness.

The Budget and Accounting Act, passed in the spirit of re-balancing the budget after the First World War, helped keep spending under control for a little over a decade. But the Great Depression soon arose, and the combination of lower revenues and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s spending on the New Deal once again led to deficits. Then, during the Second World War, the U.S. reached unprecedented deficit spending levels. The start of the Cold War combined with new political demand for domestic spending ensured that the government would never return to pre-crisis levels. By the 1950s, Presidents began to include a legislative program with the budget, advancing proposals for reforms and new programs in an effort to drive the political conversation. President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society program, including Medicare, fleshed out the remainder of the modern budget, dominated by entitlement programs.28

Understanding the Budget Process

By the time the United States entered the debates over the Safeguard Program in the late 1960s and early 1970s, deficit spending had become the new normal, even in boom times. It had become commonly accepted that it was more important to use the budget to fine-tune the economy than to keep the budget balanced, and Johnson’s guns-and-butter spending on social programs and the war in Vietnam piled onto the debt. The cries of budget reformers again began to be heard. Most famously, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his “whiz kids” attempted to bring to the Pentagon the operations

28 Schick, _Federal Budget_, 16-17.
research and systems analysis techniques they had mastered at Ford, the RAND Corporation, and elsewhere in order to improve the defense budget process.

In the midst of all this, a political scientist named Aaron Wildavsky stood up to make the case that things were perhaps not as bad as they seemed. His behavioralist approach observed that the current system, despite its flaws, fundamentally worked. The argument made sense: the propose-and-dispose system created a base for discussion, a well-established frontline position from which both sides of any given political battle could stake out ground and argue their case on an annual basis. Wildavsky called this process incrementalism, and believed it was not only how the budget process did work, but also how it ought to work. The political food fights that ensued were messy but ultimately effective: since political support had to be gathered in advance of dramatic change, inefficiencies generated by competing back-and-forth reforms were muted.29

One can look back to the beginning of the Republic to see how the theory of incrementalism applies. Consider the conversation over federal spending prior to the Civil War: both parties, regardless of name or philosophy, believed that the debate over spending priorities should be held within the constraints of thrift and self-reliance, and believed balancing the budget was not only an admirable goal but a necessity for the long-term survival of the nation. When growing political pressure led to a shift in priorities, or an expansion in the size and scope of the federal government, changes were made gradually over years or even decades. Even before the passage of the Budget and Accounting Act, a framework for negotiations, however informal, was in place.

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In the late 1960s, a dramatic shift in how politicians talk about the budget began as a result of the explosion of entitlement spending and the beginning of the culture wars. The Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 was one result. Today, even the process established in that legislation is frequently ignored in favor of ad hoc negotiations on the budget. In his later years, Wildavsky reformed his theory to take into account the more abrupt changes increasingly becoming commonplace. He came to consider the 25 or 30 years between World War II and the early 1970s as “the classical era of American national budgeting,” and spoke warmly of them:

Conflict was routinized and confined by informal understandings. These understandings, supported by the aim of balance, reinforced by agreement on the general lines of public policy and expansive economic climate, led to budgetary incrementalism. Because there was agreement on most programs, these constituted a base that was generally considered untouchable. For the most part, differences centered upon small departures from the base, rather than the program itself. . . . Calculation was improved and conflict limited by this incremental, remedial, and serial approach.\(^{30}\)

Wildavsky’s theory of incremental change remains a valid depiction of how the process is designed to work, if not how budgeting is actually done in most years.

Building on Wildavsky, Irene Rubin explains budgeting as a broader process than that of incremental change negotiated between budget experts. She breaks down five ways to study politics in the budget. The first two, reformism and incrementalism, have been discussed. The other three put interest groups, the budget process, and the broader political environment as the primary drivers of budgetary outcomes. While each of these cannot be a complete description of the process, she says that parts of each are true at

different times or levels of government. Next, she breaks down budget decisions into five clusters: process, balance, revenue, expenditure, and implementation.\(^{31}\) She concludes:

Budget outcomes are not solely the result of budget actors’ negotiating with one another in a free-for-all; outcomes depend on the environment and on the budget process, as well as individual strategies. . . . Budgeting is not well described as an annual process with little change from year to year. Budgetary decision making changes over time: interest group power waxes and wanes, competition in the budget increases and decreases, and the budget process itself varies over time.\(^{32}\)

In a broad sense, Rubin accepts Wildavsky’s theory of incrementalism, but sees the need to elaborate on the complexities. She is certainly correct to note that the details of the budget process have repeatedly changed over time, and the politics of how the budget process is used have changed even more so.

**Conclusions**

The frequent failure to establish orderly and efficient plans for federal spending in the United States is well known. Often, the budget process itself is faulted for inefficiencies that arise. However, despite the claims of reformers who would make the system more efficient by centralizing planning in the executive branch, the federal budget process as it is designed today is in fact in keeping with the ideals of the Founders, and provides through incremental change the best results possible in a responsive democracy.

On the surface, the Safeguard program appears to have all the signs of a classic government boondoggle: a political fight over approval, labor and public relations issues during construction, technological obsolescence, and ultimately cancellation, with the key


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 34.
vote occurring just one day after the system achieved Full Operational Capability. In fact, there is more to the story, which actually spans several decades. American missile defense efforts began during the Second World War, and continued through several iterations of programs – Nike-Hercules, Nike-Zeus, Nike-X, and Sentinel, in addition to Safeguard. And while the cancellation of Safeguard may suggest that the program was a failure, the successful negotiation of the ABM Treaty suggests that it may have actually been a success – an inefficient success, but a success nonetheless.

The ABM case study gives the opportunity to examine the relationship of strategy and politics in budgeting from several perspectives: diffusion of power and interservice rivalries within the Department of Defense; the centralization of power in the Secretary’s office in the McNamara years; and the primacy of Congressional influence on the defense budget at the culmination of the Safeguard deployment debate. The next three chapters will examine each stage of the ABM debate from a budgetary point of view. The last chapter will return to the topics discussed above to see what the Safeguard story can illustrate about politics and the federal budget process.
CHAPTER 2
1945-1960: INTERSERVICE RIVALRIES

Before turning to the specifics of ballistic missile defense, it is worthwhile to
examine the broader political context of the 1950s to understand how politics shaped the
size and nature of not only the defense budget, but also American national security
strategy. It is also important to look at some internal bureaucratic pressures unique to the
Department of Defense to determine their influence on the defense budget process. From
there, we will turn to the nature of deterrence and the ballistic missile threat. Finally, we
will examine the early years of competing and redundant ABM research and development
programs in the Army and the Air Force and how they were dealt with in the executive
branch and in Congress.

Defense Budgeting and the New Look

Historically speaking, the United States has dramatically drawn down defense
spending in the aftermath of each major conflict and cut domestic spending as well to pay
down debts incurred during wartime. At first, it appeared that policy in the aftermath of
the Second World War would be no different. President Harry S Truman boasted of
demobilization that cut the Department of Defense civilian workforce in half and shrank
the Army from eight million to one million soldiers in just two years, with similar
reductions in ships and aircraft. The Administration requested funding to help rebuild
Europe and contain Communism as called for by National Security Council Report 68,
the document that outlined America’s military-focused containment strategy for the Cold
War. The initial response from Congress, driven by Republican isolationists, was negative – the cost was too great. The outbreak of the Korean War marginalized those concerns. After the end of that conflict, the U.S. military for the first time would remain mobilized in peacetime. Suspicious that the Soviet strategy would be to bankrupt the United States by making it overspend on defense, President Dwight Eisenhower still tried to constrain defense spending at least somewhat by claiming a “peace dividend.”

During the Truman and Eisenhower years, the process for determining the size of the defense budget was to estimate revenues based on the maximum level of taxation the economy could sustain, then subtract domestic expenditures and foreign aid, and then allocate the remainder to national defense. In this manner, the Administration’s broader budget priorities set the outer boundaries of the defense budget process.

Despite these constraints, however, the military might of the Soviet Union was real, and a strong defensive posture was necessary. These competing interests would lead to the development of Eisenhower’s New Look doctrine, a strategy designed to minimize the financial burden of a long-term confrontation with the Soviet Union. Central to the New Look was the threat of American first use of nuclear weapons as part of U.S. massive retaliation in response to Soviet provocations, even limited ones. The shift to the New Look strategy would require large investments in nuclear forces, and put the nuclear mission at the top of the Pentagon priority list. Eisenhower also required his National Security Council to include the fiscal implications of security plans as part of their

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proposals, so that planners would remember that their decisions would not be executed in a vacuum. It may seem remarkable that a decision as fundamental as whether the United States would rely primarily on conventional or nuclear forces for its national defense would be made in large part due to budgetary constraints imposed by the politics of the moment. But all strategies must be developed within real-world constraints, budgetary limitations chief among them.

It soon became clear that the Cold War would be a long-lasting competition. Both the public and the government understood the United States to be facing a hostile, aggressive, and unpredictable adversary capable of nuclear attack. Technology was the prized attribute of the day, and research and development programs were therefore prioritized – even redundant ones. The Soviet Union responded to America’s overwhelming superiority in nuclear-capable heavy bombers by developing the ICBM and using it to launch the Sputnik. This created the political context for John F. Kennedy to successfully argue in the 1960 presidential campaign that America suffered from a “missile gap.” Despite Eisenhower’s parting warning to guard against the military-industrial complex, the perceived gap (Eisenhower knew from U-2 flights that there was no such gap, but he couldn’t reveal that to the public) opened the spigot for more defense spending. This was the context of early ABM programs: nuclear weapons programs of all sorts were at the apex of Pentagon budgeting, and the tendency was to rely on the development of state-of-the-art technology to carry the day.

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5 Ibid., 201, 205-206.
Deterrence and the Indefensible Weapon

The birth of air power brought with it claims that the world was entering a new age of warfare, requiring an entirely new set of strategies for how to prosecute war from above – and how to defend against it. What would come to be known as “strategic warfare” began in the First World War, and began to demand serious attention in the lead-up to the Second. The first modern strategic airpower advocate was the Italian general Giulio Douhet, who argued in the interwar years that a mere 300 tons of bombs would be enough to win a new European war, and the only effective defense would be a counter-offensive. When World War II broke out, the reality was not so terrifying after all. British airpower enthusiast Stanley Baldwin had argued the bomber would always get through, and it did – but once there it did less damage than anticipated.6

Soon came promises of a new unstoppable terror weapon: the German V-weapons. The first, the V-1 cruise missile, was first seen in June 1944. Because the missile was slow and low-flying, the British were able to intercept and destroy about half of the 8,000 or so that were launched at London, limiting their destructive effect. But when the second, the V-2 ballistic missile, was first deployed in September 1944, British efforts at finding a countermeasure were less successful: the missile’s speed and trajectory made it virtually impossible to hit. In the end, the only way the British managed to stop the V-2 launches was to occupy the ground from which the missiles were being launched. While issues with accuracy and explosiveness limited the missile’s destructive capability, it had

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tremendous psychological impact: for the first time, a supposedly indefensible weapon was living up to its hype.\textsuperscript{7}

Less than a year later, the first nuclear weapons exploded over Japan, and theories of strategic warfare were again dramatically changed. At last, the claims of air power advocates that the nature of warfare had irreversibly changed were made true. Military strategist Bernard Brodie observed in 1959 that “Douhet’s ideas can hardly be said to have been vindicated by World War II. . . . However, the nuclear weapon came along at the end of the war to rescue him from this error, and now his philosophy is more ascendant than ever.”\textsuperscript{8} The United States held a monopoly on nuclear technology for just four years before the Soviet Union developed a nuclear arsenal of its own, soon to be followed by others. Initial methods of defense were traditional: each side of the new Cold War strengthened its air defense system to protect against bombing raids.\textsuperscript{9}

In the United States, however, the basic precepts of deterrence were sketched out around the belief that the best defense was a strong offense – just as was postulated in the early days of strategic air power doctrine. The Eisenhower Administration’s New Look strategy increased U.S. reliance on nuclear weapons by threatening total war in response to limited provocation. The public establishment of a first-use policy was meant to deter conventional aggression with the threat of nuclear retaliation. With that in mind, as long as America maintained its superiority in heavy bombers, Americans believed they would

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 18-19.

\textsuperscript{8} Bernard Brodie, \textit{Strategy in the Missile Age} (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1959), iv-v.

\textsuperscript{9} Agrell, “Pre-empt, Balance or Intercept?,” 20-21.
be safe. Once again, an uneasy peace seemed to have been attained, at least for the United States. And then the Soviet Union launched a satellite into space.

The launch of *Sputnik* in 1957 showed that the Soviet Union had made significant advances in rocketry – advances beyond those made by the United States. More than just inspiring the space race, *Sputnik* made clear to the American public that ballistic missiles – the indefensible weapon – would soon be a real threat to the United States. Two years later, Brodie wrote of the dawning “missile age” as follows:

> The old adage that every new offensive development inevitably provokes the development of a suitable defense is hard to justify historically, and it is certainly excessively optimistic for the nuclear era. One should hesitate especially to apply it to the ballistic missile. That is not to say that effective active defenses against the missile are technically impossible, or that their development should not be pursued; it is only to point out that one must have extraordinary faith in technology, or a despair of alternatives, to depend mainly on active defenses.11

Despite these challenges, and despite the increasing reliance of the United States on a strong offensive posture as the backbone of its nuclear deterrent (the focus remained on pushing forward the state-of-the-art in American offensive missiles), military minds also began to search for a form of defense as a back-up.

Creating in 1958 to direct missile defense research, the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) examined myriad mad-science options. For instance, the ARGUS project tested whether detonating nuclear weapons in space would result in a field of electrons trapped in the earth’s magnetic field that might damage incoming nuclear warheads. It did not. A program called GLIPAR tested lasers and particle beams

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10 Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 84-85. The Air Force tended to share this assumption: while it funded ICBM studies and development work, they were not a priority until at least 1955 – and arguably not until the *Sputnik* launch.

11 Brodie, *Missile Age*, 221.
for potential usefulness. The Air Force’s Project BAMBI would have based missiles in space to fire wire mesh and other materials at Soviet ICBM silos in the event of a launch. The Navy had its own proposals: SABMIS could launch anti-missiles from ships or even submarines, perhaps with the latter stationed in the Great Lakes or under the North Pole.12 These ideas remained in the labs, as the cultural focus remained on the offense in the United States Air Force.

By contrast, the Soviet Union aggressively pursued missile defense as part of a broader expansion of the Soviet air defense system after the Second World War, spending two to four times more than the U.S. invested in similar efforts.13 This effort was in keeping with a traditional Russian military focus on defending the vast countryside, but it is wrong to rely on a simplistic understanding of the Russian character of war to explain Soviet defensive systems. The Soviet Union was not comfortable relying on the balance of terror, in no small part because it was on the wrong end of it during the early years of the Cold War. In 1964, the same year as the deployment of the Galosh ABM system around Moscow, Soviet military theorist and retired general Nikolai Talenski explained that missile defense enables a state to depend on its own resources for protection, rather than relying on the goodwill of the other side through mutual deterrence.14


It is also important to understand the Marxist dialectic in order to make full sense of Soviet military doctrine. The Soviet Union began its work on ABM systems at the same time it sought to catch up to America’s lead in strategic arms. This was part of a general tendency to begin developing defenses in partnership with an offensive system, because the dialectic requires the two opposites to be understood and developed in a unified manner. Improvements in one or the other are mutually reinforcing. In a spin on American deterrence theory, Talenski believed that the two sides ought to work to establish a harmony between offensive and defensive weapons to ensure that neither side would become an aggressor.¹⁵

**Interservice Rivalry and Concurrent Development**

Though air defense efforts were not the top priority of the United States, they were by no means ignored. The Army first started developing the Nike series of air defense weapons in the closing days of World War II, in response to German advances in jet aircraft, high-altitude bombers, and rockets. The first system, the Nike-Ajax, was successfully tested in 1951 and deployed in 1954 to defend urban areas and military installations across the country. Nearly 200 batteries were deployed by 1958, and they remained operational through 1963.¹⁶ But even in the early 1950s, the Army knew that the small warhead of the Ajax and radar limitations meant it would have a difficult time defending against a massed air attack, and began to upgrade the system to allow the missile to carry a small nuclear warhead. In 1958, the Army began deployment of Nike-


¹⁶ Lonnquest and Winkler, *Defend and Deter*, 165, 170-172.
Hercules, upgrading 110 existing Ajax installations to carry the larger missile and building 35 new installations for a total of 145 batteries.\textsuperscript{17}

The Army was not alone in building air defense installations. While the service had insisted on maintaining its point defense (close support) mission in the aftermath of World War II, a 1948 decision by the Joint Chiefs granted the Air Force the primary responsibility for protecting the nation as a whole from air attack (area defense). As a result, the Air Force was developing an anti-aircraft system of its own, called the BOMARC.\textsuperscript{18} The two systems were very similar: Nike-Hercules featured a W31 tactical nuclear warhead with a variable yield ranging from 2 to 40 kilotons (KT), while BOMARC was armed with W40 warheads with a 10 KT yield.\textsuperscript{19}

When Air Force leaders realized that the Hercules would directly compete with their system, they began a public relations offensive. The Air Staff leaked a critical analysis of Nike’s ability to intercept bombers to the \textit{New York Times}, and articles about the inferiority of Nike vis-à-vis BOMARC appeared in cities slated to receive Nike batteries. The Army asked the Secretary of Defense to make the Air Force halt its guerilla campaign, and launched a retaliatory public relations campaign called “Project Truth.”\textsuperscript{20} The duplication and inefficiency that resulted from this battle, which lasted for years, is a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item Lonnquest and Winkler, \textit{Defend and Deter}, 177, 179.
  \item Ibid., 55.
  \item Lonnquest and Winkler, \textit{Defend and Deter}, 60-62.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
good example of the interservice rivalries that plagued the Defense Department throughout the 1950s.

These fights were perhaps inevitable in an era where the primary mission of the military was dramatically changing. The Air Force had been the clear beneficiary of Eisenhower’s New Look doctrine, which placed the nuclear mission as the Pentagon’s top priority. By contrast, the Army faced the biggest demotion in the hierarchy due to the reduced role of conventional ground warfare. Organizational politics being what they are, the Army fought in earnest the roles and missions debates that emerged in the post-war period to claim a portion of the new priority. From the Army’s perspective, missiles were more related to artillery than aircraft, at least at short ranges, and the service set about developing them. It helped that they had gained the services of Wernher von Braun, the German designer of the V-2.

More well-known than the concurrent development of Hercules and BOMARC is the duplicative procurement of intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBM) by the services. In 1954, the Army began developing the Jupiter, an IRBM with a range of 1,500 miles, and the Air Force began developing the Thor, an IRBM with a range of 1,750 miles. Despite the obvious redundancy, the issue was only addressed two years later, in 1956, when a functions paper issued by the Secretary of Defense resolved the issue, unifying the ballistic missile force by granting the Air Force control of Jupiter.\(^{21}\)

That paper also sought to deal with the conflict over air defense by granting the Army control over the air defense mission, or at least the point defense portion of it. Point

defense was limited to a range of 100 miles or less. Of course, this decision did not stop
the development of either the Hercules or the BOMARC – it only limited the functional
range to which each service would use their system. It also failed to determine which
service would have overall responsibility for coordinating the two systems, giving the
Army hope that it could continue to wedge into the Air Force’s strategic deterrence
role.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, the determination led the Army to conclude that ABM systems protecting
cities and bases, like anti-aircraft artillery, were part of its mission. By 1957, the Army
was spending as much as 15 percent of its budget on air defense, leading the Air Force to
take a public stand against Army programs.\textsuperscript{23}

In 1958, the Secretary of Defense announced that the two systems were
complementary. Procurement of each continued for another year until Congress finally
got involved. In the aftermath of the \textit{Sputnik} launch, the development of either system
seemed overcome by events. The Senate passed legislation to terminate the Hercules, and
the House did the same to BOMARC. In the end, the chambers compromised on reducing
procurement of each. In contrast to the 145 Hercules sites, a total of 8 BOMARC sites
were built. Both systems were deactivated by the mid-1970s.\textsuperscript{24}

This was not the end of competition between the Army and the Air Force over
missile programs. The Army Air Forces had begun two missile defense studies during the

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 50-51.

\textsuperscript{23} Baucom, \textit{Origins of SDI}, 9. Ultimately, the ongoing conflict between the Army and Air Force
about the value of ABM gave opponents the leverage to refuse the Army’s request to deploy a system.
Once the Joint Chiefs finally reached agreement about the military value of ABM, the battle over
deployment moved to the Congress – where it was won. A brief treatment of that point will be given later
in the next chapter, but an in-depth examination of the political benefits and drawbacks of interservice
rivalries (and, by contrast, the power of a unified military position) is warranted.

\textsuperscript{24} Lonnquest and Winkler, \textit{Defend and Deter}, 62-63.
Second World War, Project Thumper and Project Wizard. These stayed with the Air Force when it became an independent service, and the latter survived until 1958. The Army continued work on ABM technology as well, pursuing plans to grow Nike technology into a new system called Nike-Zeus (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{25} The Zeus would be a tremendous upgrade from Hercules: it was designed to reach 175 miles into space, and was to be armed with a W50 warhead with a variable yield ranging from 60 to 440 KT.\textsuperscript{26}

There were again issues of rivalry: the Air Force began to publicly attack the system’s worth, arguing that the missile, like the bomber, will always get through,

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{26} Polmar and Norris, \textit{U.S. Nuclear Arsenal}, 57, 213.
especially without more advanced technology to track targets; that the radars were vulnerable to direct attack; that a concerted attack would quickly overwhelm the system; that it cost too much; that valuing the defense over the offense was outdated Maginot Line thinking; and that it was the Air Force’s mission anyway.27

The Secretary dealt with the situation in 1958 by ordering the Army to proceed with Zeus, the only system with a chance of deployment in the foreseeable future (Project Wizard did not have a deployable missile). However, the Air Force was still given a role in the effort, contributing radar and command-and-control systems from Project Wizard.28 The Army quickly moved ahead, pushing for deployment in 1959. The Secretary’s office again deferred a decision, asking the President’s Scientific Advisory Council to decide. The Council supported continued research and development, but declined to recommend deployment. The determined efforts of a small cadre of Senate supporters led Congress to provide $137 million for production in 1960, but Eisenhower did not spend the money (impoundment, or the failure to spend appropriated funds, was not yet a crime).29 The battle would continue into the Kennedy Administration.


28 Lonngquest, Defend and Deter, 108-110.

29 An interesting aside to the Army-Air Force battles of the 1950s is that the Navy was developing its own system called Talos to defend ships against kamikaze-like threats. In recognition of the fact that Project Wizard lacked a deployable missile, the Air Force had requested funding to develop a land-based variant of Talos. But the Secretary’s 1956 directive on the Jupiter and Thor missile programs forced the Air Force to hand the land-based Talos over to the Army. The Army promptly cancelled the program, probably because it really only wanted to keep it from the Air Force. Lucas and Dawson, Organizational Politics, 51. The Navy mostly kept its head down in these fights to avoid risking the other services’ acceptance of its limited land and air missions. The Navy’s real priority with regard to the nuclear mission was building support for the Polaris submarine-launched missile. Yanarella, Missile Defense Controversy, 35-36.
Conclusions

This narrative illustrates Wildavsky’s theory of incrementalism in the real world. First, there was a clear consensus on the military’s strategic goal: deterrence of nuclear war. There was also a general consensus on how to achieve it: through a strong nuclear force. But past that point there was considerable disagreement. Would the force primarily consist of bombers or missiles? Would the Air Force or the Army play the largest role? Would defensive arms be necessary or was a strong offensive force sufficient to deter war? The budget process served as the arena for deciding these questions.

The main players in these debates were experts within the military services, the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), the Bureau of the Budget, and the Congress. The path of research and development of early ABM systems was defined by organizational politics within the Department of Defense and the executive branch. The key point is how much internal executive branch factors impacted budgetary decision-making long before proposals reach Capitol Hill. Indeed, with the exceptions of Congress forcing a choice between Nike-Hercules and BOMARC and ABM advocates attempting to overturn the decision not to deploy Nike-Zeus, decisions on missile defense were mostly made within the Pentagon. While the internal nature of those debates somewhat masks the inefficiencies, the duplication of programs outlined here reveals serious issues.

Left to their own devices, the services and even OSD failed to create an efficient strategy for moving forward with missile defense. Cultural pressures within the Army and the Air Force led each to separately develop a competing system for nearly a decade to address roles and missions assigned to them. Decisions were made for the most part on
a piecemeal basis without much consideration for long-term strategy, with redundancies often eliminated only by Congressional attention. Without outside pressure dictating a resolution, each service may well have proceeded with the deployment of near-identical systems. In the absence of clearer direction from OSD, the only limiting factor of duplicative procurements appears to be the constraints placed by Congress through the appropriations process.

This poses a tremendous challenge to budget reformers who believe that the system would operate more efficiently if decisions were made by independent, non-political budget analysts, for no such thing exists. Different organizations approaching the same problem from different perspectives develop different solutions. Disagreements about strategy and resource prioritization cannot be eliminated – they must be settled somewhere. Incrementalism suggests that the budget process provides a useful arena for advancing the conversation about what strategy to take and how to prioritize resources within it. The process may lead at times to inefficient decision-making – but leaving matters to the executive branch alone, at least in this instance, would have been worse.

This is not how every budget decision was made at the time, nor before, nor after (as we will soon see). But the early years of ABM research and development showcase the incrementalist model. The course was proposed by the chiefs of the Army and the Air Force, and when they could not agree, or when duplication became too obvious, was decided by OSD and the Congress. Programs advanced year after year, and redundancies were generally resolved via compromise solutions that allowed each organization’s role in the strategic deterrence mission to be maintained.
The chief lesson to be taken from the early years of the development of missile defense in the United States is that Congressional pressure is often needed to resolve inefficiencies resulting from organizational dysfunction between the services. One cost of delaying decision-making and transferring responsibility to Congress was that each service received less funding for other priorities over the years. A secondary outcome of these battles was the gradual centralization of power in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. The Defense Reorganization Act of 1958 sought to overcome the rivalries that defined the post-war years by modifying the requirement that the services be “separately administered” to require them to be “separately organized,” allowing the Secretary of Defense to reassign any activities common to all the services to new joint agencies. The Act also took the services out of the chain of command over combat forces. This had the effect of centralizing power in OSD, opening the door to Robert S. McNamara and the “Whiz Kids.”

Defense Budgeting and the Whiz Kids

To Secretary McNamara, the key issue stymieing centralization of power in OSD was not a lack of authority, but rather a lack of effective management. For too long even powerful secretaries had deferred to the professional expertise of the military services in setting policy, often allowing duplication and service rivalries to continue. A key problem

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1 Lucas and Dawson, _Organizational Politics_, 84.
was that planning was done independently by the services using the “requirements approach,” in which each service set forward its view of the necessities of national defense. OSD would then fund as many priorities as possible within the top line imposed by the Bureau of the Budget. For the most part, this was done without attention to broader strategic priorities or eliminating redundancies. McNamara vowed to bring systems analysis to the Department of Defense, replacing the requirements approach with a new unified budget process to overcome inefficiencies generated by service biases.2

To begin to address these issues, McNamara brought Charles Hitch to the Department from the RAND Corporation to help link service planning with military-wide budgeting and maximize efficiency in the defense budget. Hitch created a new 18-month process called the Planning, Programming and Budgeting System (PPBS) for preparing the Department’s annual budget submission.3 For the first six months of the annual process, the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Policy works to create a Defense Planning Guidance (DPG) document to outline the principles the services must follow in their budget plans. During the next six months, in the programming phase, each of the services prepares a Program Objective Memorandum (POM) that details what forces and programs the services are necessary to meet the broad requirements identified in the DPG. Finally, the last six months prior to the submission of the President’s Budget are the budgeting phase, where the DOD Comptroller and the Bureau of the Budget (OMB, after 1970) unify the four service POMs, restructure budget allocations from DOD program

3 Ibid., 47-49.
elements into appropriations accounts, write budget justifications for formal submission to Congress, and unify the request with the broader President’s Budget request.4

This system, considered so successful that the Bureau of the Budget designated it as the model for all federal agencies, is thorough. But it has one clear shortcoming: no “right” answer to these questions exists. The system is useful only insomuch as it gives the organization a method to determine its own goals and a yardstick by which to measure success in accomplishing them. The process cannot in and of itself determine whether a certain goal is a good idea, or whether a certain system or program meets the goal. Good inputs are required to achieve good analysis.5 Moreover, even a perfect system cannot serve as a true crystal ball for the Pentagon. Projections of future need require assumptions about adversary decisions that may not have even been made by the opponent, making them truly unknowable. As a result, long-range efficiency planning continued to rely on worst-case scenarios conceived by the services, thereby defaulting to many of the same bureaucratic biases as the old method of requirements planning.6

**Getting Political: The Push for Nike-Zeus**

In addition to this new budget process, the new Administration created a renewed opportunity for the Army to push deployment of Nike-Zeus – this time armed with

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4 Mary Tyszkiewicz and Stephen Daggett, *A Defense Budget Primer* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 1998), 26-28. The process as described here is an accurate depiction of how the budget was prepared during the Safeguard era. However, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 established a two-year budget cycle that required the Pentagon to complete the full process only in even numbered years, with a truncated process to amend the request in odd numbered years.

5 Lucas and Dawson, *Organizational Politics*, 92-93.

lessons learned from the Air Force’s burial of the Hercules. An Army Committee on Zeus was formed to make a recommendation on deployment, and the Association of the Army published a special issue of its magazine (funded by the system’s prime contractors) in support of deployment. Trade magazine Missiles and Rockets also produced an issue dedicated to Nike-Zeus. Advocates in Congress made floor speeches. Journalists were given tours of the test range in the Kwajalein Islands. But the effort was still unsuccessful. While McNamara’s OSD funded further research, it would not deploy the Zeus.\textsuperscript{7} Despite some successful tests in the early 1960s, opponents’ views that Zeus would be technically irrelevant by the time it was built won the day. The director of ARPA was one of those opponents, on the grounds that the agency’s latest efforts would allow it to overcome the technological weaknesses of the system.\textsuperscript{8}

Congressional agitation over Nike-Zeus deployment continued to grow, climaxing in 1963 with a rare secret session of the Senate, the first since 1943, to debate increased funding for Zeus.\textsuperscript{9} While the system would never see deployment, McNamara was forced to recognize the broader political sensitivity of ABM. That led him to order the Army to begin thinking about the next generation of missile defense systems that same year. He also established the Betts Commission to investigate how an ABM system would influence nuclear deterrence and U.S.-Soviet relations. The report concluded that offensive and defensive technologies were mostly equal, that an ABM system could help

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 61-63.

\textsuperscript{8} Adams, \textit{Ballistic Missile Defense}, 32-34, 39.

\textsuperscript{9} Yanarella, \textit{Missile Defense Controversy}, 93-94.
limit damage in the event of nuclear attack, and that an ABM system would not disrupt the balance of terror between the superpowers.\(^\text{10}\)

These were not the conclusions McNamara wanted, but nonetheless OSD ordered the Army to develop a next-generation, multi-layered system known as Nike-X. It would also have new missiles: a modified version of the Zeus, to be renamed Spartan, and a new missile to be called Sprint.\(^\text{11}\) The two would work in tandem: first, long-range Spartan missiles armed with a W71 warhead capable of a 5 megaton (MT) yield would intercept incoming targets 350 miles into space and 460 miles away. Any surviving targets would be addressed just 100,000 feet above and 25 miles away by Sprint missiles that could accelerate to Mach 10 in just five seconds. These were armed with a 1 KT W66 warhead.\(^\text{12}\) Remarkably, despite the huge size of the W71 warhead, the weapon was intended to kill targets with thermal X-rays, not explosive blast.\(^\text{13}\) The key to the system was the new phased array radar (fig. 3), capable of tracking multiple targets at once. The radar was the largest success of Project Defender, the program that generated many of the mad-science ideas mentioned above.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{10}\) Baucom, *Origins of SDI*, 22-23.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{12}\) Polmar and Norris, *U.S. Nuclear Arsenal*, 63-64, 214-215. These are the specifications of what would eventually be deployed as Safeguard; at the time the decision was made to move forward with Nike-X, the modified Nike-Zeus, the entire Sprint missile, and their warheads were still conceptual.

\(^{13}\) Adams, *Ballistic Missile Defense*, 153; Yanarella, *Missile Defense Controversy*, 74. It was the Soviet Union that first discovered the destructive potential of the X-ray blast released in a thermonuclear detonation. In fact, in 1962, American scientists considered X-rays in space as a destructive mechanism and explicitly dismissed the concept. The U.S. reconsidered when a Soviet scientist spoke about it openly with American counterparts, assuming it to be common knowledge.

The technological potential of missile defense had grown, but so too had the threat. The U.S. was facing significantly more Soviet ICBMs, and launching just a few defensive missiles at incoming targets might not be enough. As a result, the justification put forth by missile defense advocates for developing a system like Nike-X changed. Their new concept was called “thin defense,” with the idea that such a system would rely on mutual deterrence to protect against an all-out attack and use ABM to protect against a tactical counter-force strike, a strike against the capital, an accidental or rogue launch of only a few missiles, or an emerging third-party threat. For RAND Corporation nuclear strategist Herman Kahn, a final justification was that the protection offered by even a thin system would give the United States the advantage in post-attack recovery.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Bruce-Biggs, \textit{Shield of Faith}, 239-241. If Kahn’s concept of post-attack recovery sounds familiar, that is because it was popularized in Stanley Kubrick’s film \textit{Dr. Strangelove} by Peter Sellers’ namesake character. In a discussion of post-nuclear scenarios in that movie, Dr. Strangelove suggests sending American men and women (the latter “selected by their sexual characteristics”) into deep mineshafts to survive radioactive fallout and “breed prodigiously.” Kubrick turns Kahn’s ideas into farce, but much of Strangelove’s dialogue is paraphrased from Kahn’s seminal text \textit{On Thermonuclear War}. 
Yet even as support for missile defense began to gain momentum within the Pentagon and related think-tanks, the ongoing debates also raised its public profile and brought increased criticism. Kahn’s ideas made sense to those who had been working in the field for years, but they were simply a new twist on an old concept to many who took a fresh look at the topic. In particular, the scientists who had been instrumental in convincing McNamara, the White House, and the Congress not to deploy Nike-Zeus were unconvinced that Nike-X would be much better. In 1964, ARPA chief scientist Herbert York and former Kennedy Administration science advisor Jerome Wiesner argued in a *Scientific American* article that missile defense was unlikely to work in its present form and, perhaps even more importantly, that even if total defense were possible it would be undesirable because it would destabilize the balance of terror.16

This argument seemed persuasive to McNamara, who added it to his repertoire right away. McNamara would always argue the technical case – even in 1967, when the battle to avoid deployment was about to be lost, he assembled a group of past and present directors of the Presidential Science Advisory Council and Defense Research and Engineering to tell President Johnson the system would not work. But he was looking to make a strategic case, as well, and York and Weisner’s conclusions made much more strategic sense to him than those of the Betts Commission. In his view, a working ABM system would lead the Soviets to develop more effective penetration aids, and a successful force protection strategy would just lead the Soviets to target American

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16 Baucom, *Origins of SDI*, 20-22. As noted above, Kahn was the inspiration for the farcical namesake character in Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*. The key concept of that film, the existence of a Soviet “Doomsday Device” that would destroy the world if a single nuclear bomb were ever detonated, was initially created by Kahn as a *reductio ad absurdum* to mock those who would rely on mutual deterrence to avoid nuclear war instead of using ABM, civil defense, and other strategies to protect against nuclear defeat.
Perhaps this was mirror-imaging: McNamara had shifted from the counter-force strategy he had advocated when he first took office to a new concept called “assured destruction,” which further emphasized the offense by constructing a “second-strike” force that could survive Soviet attack to be capable of retaliation.

Importantly in the budget wars, McNamara also argued the cost-to-benefit ratio for constructing a defensive system was much worse than the comparative ratio for improving offensive arms. OSD produced a study that concluded that the Soviets could spend just $1 on offensive arms to overcome $100 spent on defensive systems by the United States. But no matter what arguments McNamara marshaled against deployment of an ABM system, events were beginning to conspire against him.

Deployment: McNamara Overruled

As early as 1960, newspaper reports had suggested that the Soviet Union was working on its own ABM system. By 1961, the United States had confirmed that fact. By 1962, Soviet General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev had boasted to the American press that the Soviet system had progressed to the point that it could hit a fly in space. By the end of 1964, the Soviets were parading their Galosh ABM missile – and then, the same year the People’s Republic of China detonated its first nuclear weapon. This led

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18 Lonnquest and Winkler, *Defend and Deter*, 111.


20 Deane, *Soviet Strategy*, 25-28. It was the Army that made the 1961 announcement that the Soviet Union was working on an ABM – it couldn’t hurt, after all, in the Army’s push to deploy the Nike-Zeus. Yanarella, *Missile Defense Controversy*, 62.
McNamara to direct the Army study team working on estimates of enemy missile
development to analyze the Chinese threat. It concluded that China was unlikely to field
more than 100 missiles prior to 1985. This suggested that a thin ABM system might make
sense against the Chinese.\footnote{Lee, \textit{ABM Treaty}, 51-52.} These were two key inflection points: the Soviets were
deploying ABM first, and the Chinese were changing the paradigm.

Much to McNamara’s chagrin, everything was coming together in favor of
deployment. OSD analysts re-estimated that the cost-benefit ratio had come down from
$100 to $1 in favor of the offense to just $4 to $1. The Army had concluded that the
system would effectively protect millions of lives, as long as the Soviet Union maintained
a counter-force strategy rather than switching to counter-value (population) targeting. In
1966, the Chiefs of the Navy and Air Force finally relented in their opposition, leading to
unanimous Joint Chiefs support of ABM deployment for the first time. McNamara had
been fighting to get control over the service budgets for years, but once he was able to do
so the chiefs realized the power of unifying against him. Not only that, they circumvented
him and gave a presentation directly to Johnson on the matter.\footnote{Ibid., 53-55.}

Conflict between the services and OSD had become common by the mid-1960s.
Differences over the war in Vietnam, procurement decisions, and McNamara’s
management style were spilling over, and the chiefs increasingly began to work outside
the system by appealing to Congress or the President.\footnote{Yanarella, \textit{Missile Defense Controversy}, 56-57.} McNamara was able to hold the

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line on ABM for several years by convincing Johnson to take a compromise approach: propose arms control negotiations with the Soviets and include funding in the budget to be used if talks failed. The Soviets, it turned out, were not interested in limiting ABM deployment. At a press conference during the 1967 Glassboro summit, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin indignantly remarked that “an antimissile system may cost more than an offensive one, but is intended not for killing people but for saving human lives.”

The rebuke increased domestic pressure on the President to deploy. In addition to the growing sound and fury from Congressional supporters in hearings and on the floor, Congress sided with the Joint Chiefs over McNamara in 1967 and funded pre-production activities to prepare for deployment. A Senate amendment to strip funding was defeated by a vote of 73 to 14. In anticipation of the 1968 presidential campaign, the Republican National Committee published booklets titled *The Missile Defense Question: Is LBJ Right?* and *Statement on the Deployment of an Anti-Ballistic Missile System*. A politician as shrewd as LBJ was left with little choice but to compromise. The President, who still intended to run for re-election, would not allow an “ABM gap” to become an issue.

McNamara gave the President a way out: a “thin” system addressing the Chinese threat would appease missile defense advocates while postponing, perhaps forever, full deployment of the Nike-X system. The system McNamara proposed deploying was to be called Sentinel, and it would consist of 15 installations – 13 in the continental U.S. and

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one each in Alaska and Hawaii. His September 1967 pitching the concept speech was unusual: he spent most of his time arguing against ABM. He said that nuclear superiority was an absurd concept in a world where both sides had overbuilt nuclear arms past any real requirements. He argued that the second-strike capability of each side was such that a successful first strike by either was impossible. And he reiterated that any ABM system could easily be defeated with more decoys, warheads, and missiles. Only after this tour de force against a heavy ABM system did McNamara announce the Administration’s plans for Sentinel. And afterward he proceeded with a reminder that offensive arms, not ABM, remained the best defense against a Soviet strike. Years after his speech, McNamara remarked that he would not have changed a word of the first three-quarters of the speech, focused on the problems with a thick system, but would junk the Sentinel announcement, which he said was only included as a result of the Administration’s recognition of the strong political pressure favoring deployment.

Conclusions

Just as in the early years of missile defense, the McNamara years vividly illustrate Wildavsky’s theory of incrementalism. There was a clear consensus that the U.S. should be funding the research and development missile defense systems, and there was a general consensus that Nike-Zeus and Sentinel were the most promising programs. But

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28 Lonnquest and Winkler, Defend and Deter, 112, 192.


30 Baucom, Origins of SDI, 37-38.
there was tremendous debate about whether the U.S. should pursue deployment and even more of a dispute over whether the U.S. should seek arms control talks to prohibit ABM systems. Once again, the budget process was the key arena for resolving these disputes. And once again, just as in the early years, decisions were for the most part made by the executive branch before the budget request was sent to Congress, at least until the last year or so.

The biggest change was the transfer of power from the chiefs of the military services to the Office of the Secretary of Defense. That had huge implications for how the budget was built within the Pentagon, and within this case study helps to determine whether a more executive-focused budgeting system would in fact lead to greater efficiency. The Administration’s proposal to deploy Sentinel suggests that it does not. McNamara staunchly opposed deploying an ABM for years, and changed his mind only when the service chiefs unified against him and went directly to the President to make their case. The President’s decision to deploy was made more on the basis of domestic politics than the technological advances of the Nike-X system or the strategic realities of assured destruction. Once again, the key driver of budgetary decisions was not strategy. Instead, it was the growing conflict between the service chiefs and the secretary – and, just as importantly, between President Johnson and a potential Republican opponent.

In light of this internal conflict within the bureaucracy, issues were left to the Congress to resolve. Once again, decisions were made year by year. Despite the best efforts of McNamara to find a strategic justification for (or, better yet, against) ABM deployment, the best OSD could do was continue to robustly fund research and
development of ABM systems and defer the decision to deploy to another day. Once again, even with the benefit of McNamara’s systems analysis, the services and OSD were unable to craft an efficient strategy for moving forward with (or abandoning) missile defense. Without outside pressure, this struggle would likely have continued. The failure to craft a clear strategy even when power was consolidated in OSD reaffirms the challenge posed to reformers who would place decisions in the hands of budget analysts.

What is most noteworthy about this period is that Congress was beginning to take a growing interest in the debate over ABM even as McNamara was working to make the defense budget process more centralized and efficient. Congressional attention began to quickly grow with the announcement of the Sentinel proposal, which proved to be a lightning rod for public criticism. The mostly internal processes driving the missile defense debates up to and including the decision to propose deployment stand in stark contrast to the intensely political process that determined the fate of the Sentinel system and its successor, Safeguard.
CHAPTER 4
1968-1976: CONGRESS TAKES CHARGE

The early battles of missile defense primarily took place in the executive branch – between the Army and Air Force and between the services and OSD – and their outcomes were determined primarily by internal constraints: technical, organizational, and bureaucratic. In 1965, public awareness of ABM was so low that two-thirds of the American people mistakenly believed that the United States already was protected by a missile defense system.¹ With such little public attention, it is little wonder that budget battles over the system were fought incrementally by a small group of elites. But that would begin to change with the Johnson Administration’s decision to deploy the Sentinel system, and the small role Congress had carved out quickly began to grow.

Sentinel: The Public Takes Note

Early reaction to the decision to deploy Sentinel was mixed. Obviously, China was not happy with the system, arguing that it was intended to support an offensive nuclear attack by the United States. Nor were the Soviets, who blamed the deployment decision on the American military-industrial complex. American allies were concerned about not being consulted and generally stood opposed.² The chattering class figured out

¹ Yanarella, Missile Defense Controversy, 146.

² The Canadians were apparently never consulted through any of this, despite the fact that the 5 MT Spartan missiles to be launched by both the Sentinel and Safeguard systems would have detonated in outer space above Canada. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird said that an understanding had been reached in 1967, but Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau denied that claim and remained an opponent of the system even after a meeting with President Nixon. Adams, Ballistic Missile Defense, 204; Jay Walz, “Missile Dispute Erupts in Canada,” New York Times, March 20, 1969.
that the system would be more effective in defending the President against domestic political threats than protecting the nation against ICBMs. And those who advocated the deployment of a heavy system complained that Sentinel was not robust enough. In 1967, Congressional hearings featured Administration witnesses supporting the thin system and scientists and civilian strategists arguing against it.³

By 1968, opposition was beginning to grow. First scientists united in opposition to deployment, including George Kistiakovsky at Harvard; James Killian, Jerome Weisner, Jack Ruina, and George Rathjens at MIT; Wolfgang Panovsky at Stanford; and David Inglis at the Argonne National Laboratory. Jeremy Stone lobbied against the system on behalf of the Federation of American Scientists, an organization that fought in the 1940s for civilian control of nuclear weapons engineering. In addition to public attacks on Sentinel, Panovsky met with several senators for private briefings on the technical issues with the system.⁴ The scientists attacked not only the technological shortcomings of the Sentinel system but also the strategic justification of the decision to deploy. A chief problem with Sentinel, wrote Richard Garwin and Hans Bethe in *Scientific American*, was that it encouraged the mistaken belief that missile defense is feasible, increasing the demand for a nation-wide system.⁵

At the same time the academic community was beginning to raise doubts about the technical and strategic feasibility of ABM, the public was beginning to doubt the military’s claims about the path to victory in Vietnam in the aftermath of the Tet

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⁴ Finney, *Historical Perspective*, 35.

offensive. The Johnson Administration’s acceptance of a $6 billion cut to domestic programs in exchange for a 10 percent war tax made clear that the tradeoff between guns and butter could not be avoided forever, breathing life into liberal complaints about runaway defense spending. Throughout the year, the Senate repeatedly voted on amendments to cut ABM funding sponsored by Senators John Sherman Cooper (R-KY) and Philip Hart (D-MI), though all were defeated. But opponents of the system were expanding their fight from the floors of Congress to the public arena, just as supporters of Nike-Zeus had done years prior. Critical editorials were published by the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other newspapers.6

The real death knell for Sentinel was public opposition, a problem inherent in the nature of the system. The Sentinel deployment plan called for 15 sites in the continental United States and one site each in Alaska and Hawaii. The system would provide point defense against incoming ballistic missiles for major cities and the missile fields.7 The Nike-Hercules program had deployed nuclear-armed missiles in and near cities around the country for years without generating much protest, but that was possibly only because the Army had never publicly acknowledged the missiles were armed with nuclear warheads. With Sentinel, the plans for nuclear warhead loading were public.8 So when the Army began to move ahead with land acquisition, local opposition began to grow. Seattle residents were outraged when they learned of plans to build a site just a mile from

6 Adams, Ballistic Missile Defense, 182-183.

7 Lonnquist, Defend and Deter, 112, 193. The sites included Boston; New York City; Washington, DC; Albany, Georgia; Detroit; Chicago; Dallas; Salt Lake City; Seattle; San Francisco; Los Angeles; and Whiteman (MO), Grand Forks (ND), Malmstrom (MT), and F.E. Warren (WY) Air Force Bases.

8 Finney, Historical Perspective, 34-35.
downtown. Chicago residents formed the “West Suburban Concerned Scientists Group” to oppose construction there. And leading intellectuals in Boston created the “New England Citizens Committee on ABM” to make their voice heard. Residents in many communities were concerned that missile defense would actually leave them less safe, since it could end up increasing the number of Soviet missiles targeting their city – and carried the risks of accidental detonation on the ground or even friendly fire in the event of a mishap during launch.9

*Safeguard: Nixon’s Response*

In response to fierce local opposition delaying construction at several planned sites, a letter from Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) requesting a delay in deployment, and finally objections by the Senate Armed Services Committee halting the land acquisition process from moving forward, the newly-elected Nixon Administration’s Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird called a halt to Sentinel deployment on February 6, 1969, pending a one-month review of the ABM issue.10

During that period, the Pentagon prepared a set of options for the new President. Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard provided Nixon with four choices: a thick system protecting 25 of the country’s largest cities, the Sentinel thin system protecting 15 of the largest cities, a thin system called option I-69 to defend the ICBM fields, or no ABM deployment at all. Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger believed that the deployment of the Sentinel system could ignite an arms race with the Soviets, and

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agreed with Packard’s recommendation that the Administration should proceed with the I-69 deployment option. In their view, option I-69 would respond to the construction of the Soviet ABM system without upsetting the balance between offensive and defensive systems or American and Soviet nuclear forces.\textsuperscript{11}

On March 14, 1969, Nixon publicly announced the Administration’s new plan for ABM deployment, which he called Safeguard in an attempt to differentiate it from the Sentinel plan. Its intent would be to protect the American land-based nuclear force, the most reliable deterrent of war. Protecting cities could perhaps cut in half the loss of life in the event of war, but protecting the ICBM fields would inject enough uncertainty into Soviet calculations of the odds of a successful first strike that it would ensure war was deterred altogether. Interestingly, even as the Administration attempted to reassure the Soviets that the new system was intended to be entirely defensive, they pivoted from the Chinese threat to the Soviet threat as the justification to build it.\textsuperscript{12}

While the new Safeguard plan helped to address concerns about basing nuclear missiles near cities, it did little to quell broader opposition to ABM deployment. Part of the reason is likely that it was not that different than Sentinel. The plan was to begin with two sites protecting the missile fields around Malmstrom and Grand Forks Air Force Bases and expand deployment over time. If fully constructed, the system would have included the four missile bases and Albany, Georgia, location covered by the Sentinel plan, and also regional sites covering many of the same cities Sentinel would have


\textsuperscript{12} Finney, \textit{Historical Perspective}, 36-37.
protected. Sites would be placed in “southern New England” instead of Boston and New York, the “Michigan/Ohio area” instead of Detroit, the “Northwest” instead of Seattle, “central and southern California” instead of San Francisco and Los Angeles, and “Texas” instead of Dallas. The only significant change was that Chicago, Salt Lake City, Hawaii, and Alaska would no longer receive sites. To many ABM opponents, the underlying purpose of Safeguard was little different than that of Sentinel: a foot in the door to a heavy system.

Beating the Drum: Interest Group Lobbying

During the five-week interregnum between the demise of Sentinel and the birth of Safeguard, both supporters and opponents marshaled forces, honed arguments, and wrote reports. In response to grassroots organizations led by ABM opponents, conservative opinion leaders organized their own groups. With the stage set by the handful of votes in Congress over Sentinel, the battle over the deployment of Safeguard was certain to be very intense – and, for the first time in the missile defense debate, very public. By April 1969, in contrast to the 1965 poll showing that two-thirds of Americans were confused enough to believe they already benefited from a missile defense system, a new poll found 47 percent of Americans favoring deployment of Safeguard, 26 percent opposed and just 27 percent undecided.

Opponents wasted no time attacking Nixon’s new proposal. More organizations were founded – the National Citizens Committee Concerned About the Deployment of

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13 Lonnquist, Defend and Deter, 193.

14 Baucom, Origins of SDI, 43.
ABM, the National Science Advisory Committee Against ABM, Computer Professionals Against ABM, Universities Committee Against ABM, the Ad Hoc Committee of New Yorkers Against ABM, and so on – and many long-established arms control groups, universities, religious organizations, and even unions came out against it. New York publisher Cass Canfield raised money to fund a lobbying effort against the system.15

Senator Kennedy funded a private report concluding that Safeguard would not work. Published in early May with the pretext that the public had thus far heard only the Department of Defense’s side of the Safeguard debate, the text was edited by long-time ABM opponents Jerome Weisner and Abram Chayes. Contributions came from left-leaning luminaries like Bill Moyers, Hans Bethe, Ted Sorensen, and others. Their arguments focused on a range of fairly specific issues, including whether the President would have time to fire the ABM, whether the technical specifications of the system were sufficient, how the Soviets might react, and how America’s NATO allies might feel.16

In response, William Kintner of the Foreign Policy Research Institute published a collection titled *Safeguard: Why ABM Makes Sense* in order to “illuminate the debate,” with essays from supporters of the system, including physicist John Foster, Jr., Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Senators Scoop Jackson (D-WA), Howard Baker (R-TN), and Gale McGee (D-WY), and others.17 Along similar lines, Herman Kahn at the Hudson Institute led the effort to put out *Why ABM: Policy Issues in the Missile Defense*

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*Controversy*, a book that Kahn called “a reasonable and useful attempt to redress what has become a rather one-sided public discussion.” These are but three of the most well-known of dozens of studies, reports, and advocacy pieces published on the ABM question.

Longtime foreign policy luminaries Paul Nitze and Dean Acheson enlisted RAND’s Albert Wohlstetter to found a group called the Committee to Maintain a Prudent Defense Policy. The purpose of the organization was purportedly to enhance the thoughtfulness of debates over national security, but its real aim was to defend Safeguard against attack. Nitze had long been suspicious of scientists who got involved with nuclear policy, soured on the concept by Robert Oppenheimer’s arguments against developing the hydrogen bomb in the 1940s. By the 1960s, Acheson had split with his party and had come to believe that the ABM issue was simply a cover for a broader attack on American defense policy toward the Soviet Union, calling his fellow Democrats “wooly-headed.” With Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, Peter Wilson, and Edward Luttwak as analysts, the Committee went to work putting together the case for Safeguard. Unlike the opposition, theirs was not a grassroots movement. But to their credit, Acheson and Nitze registered the committee as a lobbying organization and refused to accept money from the defense industry, even though it their budget – in total, they spent around $15,000.

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21 Ibid., 272, 274.
Nonetheless, their Committee was effective. In May, it sent a letter to members of Congress calling opposition “an emotional rather than a reasoned public response,” and in June Acheson testified before the Joint Economic Committee that Safeguard was the best technology available for protecting the ICBM force, an essential goal to nuclear security. He also introduced the argument that voting against ABM would harm the ability of the United States to successfully negotiate an arms control agreement with the USSR. In July, Acheson appeared on the David Frost show to discuss Safeguard and penned letters to the editor on the topic, drawing more public attention to the debate.22

The battle extended to conferences and marches in Washington. In 1969, the conference of the American Physical Society saw over 2,000 individuals attend a session on missile defense, after which 250 marched to the White House to meet with Nixon’s science advisor about Safeguard. Others went to Capitol Hill to lobby the Senate.23 A Conference on the Military Budget and National Priorities was held to argue the broader point that defense spending ought to be cut in favor of domestic programs, with Safeguard as a key example. More than 50 Members of Congress were in attendance.24 Testifying before Congress, scientists again attacked not only the system’s technical flaws (as with Sentinel, they said that the defense can be easily overwhelmed by numbers or penetration aids and that the radar could easily be blinded if targeted directly) and presented their views on the strategic issues as well. The scientists believed what was known as the action-reaction phenomenon was driving the arms race. That theory

22 Ibid., 272-273.

23 Baucom, Origins of SDI, 42-44.

suggested the United States often pushed ahead with deploying new technology simply because it could, and the Soviet Union responded to American deployments with new systems of its own. By this logic, an effective American defense would only create the need for a better Soviet offense, creating a new cycle in the arms race. By contrast, they believed, American restraint would open the door to arms control negotiations.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{The Showdown in Congress}

All of this public attention was having an effect: Congress was giving the issue greater consideration. Traditionally, the military’s budget requests did not face much criticism outside of the Appropriations and Armed Services Committees – and sometimes not even there. But this was changing. The scientific community gave Senate liberals the expertise they needed to challenge the decision to deploy. The Senate Armed Services Committee scheduled its annual posture hearing with Secretary Laird for March 20, 1969. In a breach with tradition, the hearing would be open, because the Disarmament Subcommittee of the Committee on Foreign Relations had scheduled an open hearing the next day with Laird – and Safeguard opponents – as witnesses.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25} Freedman, \textit{Nuclear Strategy}, 320-322. ABM opponents seized on Eisenhower’s warning of the military-industrial complex to argue that most weapons decisions were being made not on the basis of strategy, but simply on technological capability. If the Pentagon funded research and development into a system, the theory went, the prestige of the engineers who built it and programmers who funded it relied on the system’s eventual deployment – even if it was not a strategic necessity. This led one Senator to refer to the Safeguard program as “a missile in search of a mission.” Freedman, \textit{Nuclear Strategy}, 322-323. For his part, in a 1969 Commencement Address at the Air Force Academy, Nixon seized on a different warning from Ike: the threat that the public could become a “captive of a scientific-technological elite.” Yanarella, \textit{Missile Defense Controversy}, 178.

\textsuperscript{26} The Armed Services Committees have gradually shifted from closed-door hearings to public hearings over time, but have nonetheless remained fairly bipartisan. This underlines the thesis that the key problem generating inefficiency in government is politics, not process. Where general consensus exists, as it does on the Armed Services Committees, battles around the edges can be waged with generally
Subcommittee’s Chairman, Senator Albert Gore (D-TN), was a staunch opponent of ABM, and was determined to make the Safeguard debate a public one.27

After Laird appeared before the Subcommittee on March 21 to hostile questioning, Gore continued to drive his point home on Safeguard. On March 26, the Subcommittee saw a battle of charts between Deputy Secretary Packard, who showed how the Soviet Union was planning a first strike, and Chairman Gore, who responded with a competing presentation showing that the U.S. had a sufficient second-strike capability even if the Soviets attacked, rendering the ABM question irrelevant. On March 27, Secretary of State William Rogers testified that the U.S. could terminate its ABM efforts if the Soviets did so first, and stated that ABM would not be a strong bargaining chip in arms control negotiations.28 It was becoming apparent that while McNamara may have lost the Sentinel deployment battle, he was winning the war: his technical analysis and strategic perspective were key to the debate, and the broader question of civilian control of the military was at the heart of the Safeguard fight.29

On June 27, the Senate Armed Services Committee reported its annual defense authorization bill, including $345.5 million for the deployment of Safeguard, by a vote of 10 to 7. The majority report stated that the system was necessary to protect America’s land-based nuclear force against a Soviet first-strike capability, but acknowledged that

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28 Ibid., 205, 207.

the system would be overwhelmed by a robust attack. The minority argued for more research and development funding to overcome the technical challenges still facing the system. This close vote was an ominous sign for a committee that nearly always reports its bill by unanimous vote. Indeed, by mid-summer, it had become apparent that the Senate as a whole was roughly split on Safeguard deployment, with a few uncommitted senators set to determine the outcome.30

The floor debate on the defense authorization bill opened on July 9, and carried on for nearly a month before three key votes determined the outcome of whether or not Safeguard would be deployed. The debate was heated throughout, with *ad hoc* bipartisan coalitions arguing the case on either side. Proponents continued to make the case that Soviet development of the SS-9 heavy ICBM was an effort to enhance its first-strike capability, and further argued that the development of an American ABM system was necessary to achieve success in arms control talks with the Soviets. At this, Senator Gore accused proponents of moving the goalposts by shifting from a strategic argument to a “bargaining chip” argument. Senators Jackson and Stennis (D-MS) rebutted Gore’s attack, saying that both arguments were legitimate and important.31

As the debate moved along, the decisions of the few undecided senators were anxiously awaited. Senator George Aiken (R-VT), the most senior Republican among the uncommitted votes, came out opposed, leading supporters to consider compromise to avoid total defeat. But then, in another surprise, his Vermont colleague Senator Winston

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31 Ibid., 46-47.
Prouty (R-VT) came out in favor of Safeguard, despite having opposed Sentinel a year prior. His argument was that Safeguard provided an “extra button” in the event of crisis, an alternative to the “use-or-lose” dichotomy that would face the President if the Soviets were to launch an attack. His decision thwarted the momentum of opponents.

On August 6, the Senate at last proceeded to vote on the issue. Three amendments would be considered. The first, offered by Senator Margaret Chase Smith (R-ME), would strip all funding for Safeguard, including even research and development money; it was defeated 89 to 11. The second was the key vote: Senators Gore, Smith, Cooper and Hart worked out a proposal to eliminate the authorization of funding for deployment of Safeguard, but redirect the money to research on other ABM systems. The vote was tied; Vice President Spiro Agnew broke the tie in opposition to the amendment and it failed, 50 to 51. Finally, a Cooper-Hart amendment that would have prohibited deployment but fully funded ongoing research and development, even for Safeguard, failed 49 to 51, with Senator Smith standing in opposition any funding for the Safeguard program, even research and development funding. On August 7, there would be one final vote: an amendment by Senator Thomas McIntyre (D-NH) would have authorized deployment of a developmental system but prohibited deployment of actual missiles until the conclusion

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33 Baucom, Origins of SDI, 47-49. While it’s impossible to say exactly how outside events influenced the outcome of the Safeguard debate, the infamous Chappaquiddick accident involving Senator Ted Kennedy and Mary Jo Kopechne occurred on July 18, in the midst of Kennedy’s efforts to line up votes in opposition to deployment. Two days later, on the opposite end of the spectrum, the Apollo moon landing occurred, demonstrating the apparent ability of the American scientific community to overcome even the most difficult technical challenges. What is certain is that participants on both sides of the debate knew it was not occurring in a vacuum – for instance, SANE ran ads in opposition to Safeguard advertising the system as coming from “the people who brought you Vietnam.” Bruce-Biggs, Shield of Faith, 304, 316.

34 Ibid., 50.
of an additional review by Congress. That amendment was defeated 27 to 70. The Senate passed the authorization bill on September 18.\textsuperscript{35}

While there would be more floor debates over appropriating the authorized funds and future debates over expanding the program, the 50-51 Senate vote against the effort to strip funding was the high-water mark of opposition to Safeguard, at least until the program’s cancellation in 1975. In the House, the vote was not dramatic. An amendment to strip deployment funding failed 105 to 209, and an amendment to remove all funding lost 93 to 270. When it came time to provide appropriations for the authorized purposes, more amendments to defund Safeguard were again defeated by relatively wide margins.\textsuperscript{36}

\textit{The End of Missile Defense}

Both the Nixon Administration and the largest opponents of Safeguard agreed on the importance of arms control talks with the USSR, even as they vehemently disagreed about the best way to enter or conclude such talks. The Soviet Union had had opposed Lyndon Johnson’s initial 1964 entreaty to limit the construction of ABM systems, in part because it had begun construction of a missile defense system well before the United States, deploying the Galosh that year. By 1967, when McNamara was attempting to convince Johnson that ABM was not technically feasible and the American people that only a thin system was strategically worthwhile, the Soviets were coming to similar conclusions on their own. Technically, the Galosh system was roughly equivalent to the American Nike-Zeus system that several administrations and Congresses had refused to

\textsuperscript{35} Adams, \textit{Ballistic Missile Defense}, 216, 221.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 221.
deploy, despite the best efforts of the Army. Moreover, the United States had begun investing in penetration aids and Multiple Independent Reentry Vehicles (MIRV) weapons, the cost-effective offensive upgrades McNamara had anticipated. In 1968, the Soviets unilaterally halted further development of the Galosh system.37

With Safeguard funding approved in the Senate, the debate over whether the United States would begin to move forward with its own system was settled. Supporters had argued that deployment would provide the Administration with a key bargaining chip for negotiating an arms control treaty. In 1968, just three days after the Senate first voted to fund Sentinel, the Soviet Union agreed to open discussions on ABM limitations. The next year, proponents of using ABM as a negotiating tactic for arms control appeared to be proven right once again when the Soviet Union formally agreed to begin the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks on October 26, almost immediately after the bill authorizing the deployment of Safeguard received final approval in the House.38

The Nixon Administration continued to pursue the development and expansion of the Safeguard system, asking for $1.5 billion in 1970 to begin work on a third site protecting the ICBM fields around Whiteman AFB, Missouri, and land acquisition for five other sites, including one near Washington, DC. This ignited another fierce debate over Safeguard in the Senate. After U.S. arms control chief negotiator Gerard Smith

37 Lee, *ABM Treaty*, 42-43. The fact that the USSR moved ahead with deployment of an inferior system and the United States did not is revealing. The Soviet Union tended to develop and deploy weapons systems in an iterative process. By contrast, the U.S. tended to seek technological breakthroughs in the research and development phase before moving ahead with deployment. Yanarella, *Missile Defense*, 169, 192. This trend has actually been exacerbated over time, and a case can be made that it is the primary culprit for the increasing difficulty in completing defense acquisition programs on time and on budget.

stated in a private telegram that funding for Safeguard deployment was essential to provide leverage for SALT negotiations, the pro-ABM side won a compromise: money for the first two sites and Whiteman, but nothing for the next five sites.\textsuperscript{39} Nixon used similar arguments as Smith in rejecting calls for declaring a unilateral moratorium on the testing of MIRV weapons. The United States, Nixon said, would negotiate only from a position of strength.\textsuperscript{40}

Ironically, despite the belief that Safeguard created leverage for arms control talks, the Nixon Administration nearly bargained it away without getting anything in return. The United States offered the Soviets two options for an treaty ABM: one in which both the U.S. and USSR agreed to prohibit the systems entirely, and a fallback in which each nation could maintain a missile defense complex around its national capital region. The position, offered in the hope that it would make the Soviets more willing to deal on offensive arms limitations, was strange in light of the fact that the USSR already had a system around Moscow and the 1970 Senate compromise had revealed that the U.S. had no chance of building one around Washington, DC. It was a failed product of the interagency bureaucracy: the Department of Defense opposed outright prohibition while the Department of State supported it, so the two agencies compromised on a fallback position the Soviets were most likely to accept – despite its lack of strategic sense. The Soviets predictably accepted it, putting the United States in an impossible position for

\textsuperscript{39} Yanarella, \textit{Missile Defense}, 159-190.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 179-180.
almost a year, when the U.S. advanced a new proposal to allow both countries to keep their existing ABM systems but prohibit new development at other sites.41

After two years of negotiations, the first SALT agreements were signed in Moscow by President Nixon and Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev on May 26, 1972. The agreements contained limitations on both defensive and offensive arms. The ABM treaty limited each side to two defensive systems, one protecting the national capital region and one protecting a missile field. The offensive agreement was much weaker, simply a five-year accord to freeze total numbers of delivery systems – but not warheads.42 After the Senate ratified the treaty by a vote of 88 to 2, the balance of terror known as Mutual Assured Destruction was locked into place: both sides agreed to renounce the deployment of any new defensive systems against nuclear attack and rely instead on American deterrence theory. This had long been a goal of the arms control thinkers known as the finite containment school – it was the policy of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency going back to the Kennedy Administration, and Jerome Wiesner had been publishing on the value of strategic parity since before that – and at last it was realized.43

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41 Baucom, *Origins of SDI*, 56-57, 64.

42 Ibid., 70-71. Arms control advocates were thrilled that an agreement had been reached, but disappointed that the offensive agreement was so much weaker than the ABM treaty. Many were extremely disturbed that SALT did not address the MIRV issue. That failure led to one of the key debates of the 1980s, over deployment of Peacekeeper, an ICBM loaded with ten warheads per missile. Opponents of the system argued that it was inherently destabilizing because it presented such an attractive target that it only made strategic sense as a first-strike weapon. While there’s no room to consider it here, the MIRV issue may provide a useful case study of opportunity cost and unintended consequences in arms control negotiations.

Marginalized by the ABM treaty, Safeguard was on life support. A 1974 protocol to the treaty further limited the two countries by reducing the number of ABM sites allowed to just one each. Grand Forks was selected as the only site the U.S. would complete, since its construction had outpaced Malmstrom’s due to labor relations issues at the latter site. The Army found that the technical issues raised by the system’s opponents in the 1960s had merit after all, and requested funding to prototype a next-generation system called Site Defense even before Safeguard achieved Full Operational Capability, which finally occurred on October 1, 1975. Just one day later, in the aftermath of Congressional hearings that revealed Pentagon studies showing that an attack by Soviet missiles armed with MIRVs would overwhelm Safeguard – and that the Army was planning to deactivate the site in 1976 – the House voted to put an end to the program. The Senate agreed, denying the Pentagon’s request to operate the system for a year to gain technical experience, and the system was shut down in 1976. The debate was over. Missile defense returned to a research and development program, where it would remain through the end of the Cold War.44

Conclusions

In this third and final phase of the missile defense debate, incrementalism in the budget process is seen in a very different way. The American post-war consensus was beginning to break down, offering new challenges to long-held beliefs. There was still a clear consensus about the need to deter nuclear war, but there was starting to be serious disagreement about how best to attain that goal. Many on the left, wary of the military in

44 Baucom, Origins of SDI, 95-97.
the aftermath of the Vietnam War and suspicious of the executive branch in light of Johnson’s decision not to run and Nixon’s resignation, viewed arms control talks as preferable what would come to be called “peace through strength.” For these reasons, the missile defense battles that had previously been waged between the services and within the Pentagon shifted to Congress. From the 1967 proposal to deploy Sentinel through 1975, the budget battles over missile defense would no longer be fought within the bureaucracy by a group of elites, nor would their outcomes be determined by technical or organizational constraints. While the incremental nature of the outcomes of the debates would not fundamentally change, the battles would be fought on the floors of Congress, and the results determined by democratic politics.

From one perspective, this period of Congressional dominance seems to be the least efficient. While the service-driven process of the 1950s led to duplication of systems and the systems analysis approach of the 1960s resulted in a conflict between the Joint Chiefs and OSD resolved only by the President, the Congressional Safeguard debates of 1969 and the 1970s resulted in billions of dollars spent constructing a hulking pyramids of concrete and steel and dozens of missile silos (fig. 4) across the prairies of North Dakota, only to be abandoned just a few years later.

Despite the inefficiency, it was popular outrage that brought it to the attention of the legislature, and what followed was a very public debate. It is perhaps unclear how much the public actually understood: while a 1965 poll showed that two-thirds of Americans believed the U.S. had a missile defense system already and an April 1969 poll found just 27 percent undecided about Safeguard, a July 1969 poll found 58 percent of
the public describing themselves as undecided or uninformed. But regardless of how well people actually understood the issues, it was public opposition that brought the fight to Congress, and it was the elected representatives of the people who made the decision to deploy – a decision made despite public knowledge of the fact that the system might be little more than an expensive bargaining chip in reaching the SALT agreements. And regardless of how expensive of a bargaining chip Safeguard might have been, it is important that the SALT treaties enshrined the American conception of nuclear strategy

as inherently offensive in nature. While Premier Kosygin had angrily exclaimed at the 1967 Glassboro summit that “defense is moral, offense is immoral,” the USSR was forced to reconcile itself to the American point of view.46

Finally, it is important to note that the decision-making process itself remained an incremental one, even as the battle shifted from the executive branch to Congress. First, in response to Congressional action, the Sentinel plan was modified to Safeguard; then, Safeguard deployment was approved – but only for two sites. The next year, one more site was added. Finally, after the ABM treaty, Safeguard was cancelled – but even then research and development work was funded. Rather than making irreversible judgments, Congress dealt with the issue gradually. The inertia in the system required it.

Once again, a tremendous challenged is posed to those who would reform the budget process to place it above the fray of politics. Even in a highly politicized environment, the system functioned more or less as it should. There were indeed inefficiencies, but the entire missile defense experience from the close of World War II through Safeguard was rife with inefficiencies, regardless of where the budget battles were fought or what bodies took the lead in fighting them. While there are ways the process can be improved, the key inefficiencies seen in this story are the result of shortcomings in strategy and politics, not in process. In the last chapter, it will be shown that politics determine the perceived success of process, leading to the conclusion that the only way to address these inefficiencies is through a change in politics, not in process.

46 Baucom, Origins of SDI, 34.
CHAPTER 5
LESSONS LEARNED

Over three decades, the debate over ABM deployment moved from the Pentagon to the President of the United States and finally to Congress. Through each stage of the fight, we can see components of Aaron Wildavsky’s theory of incrementalism brought to life. As mentioned in chapter one, Wildavsky celebrated this period as “the classical era of national budgeting,” one in which, “for the most part, differences centered upon small departures from the base, rather than the program itself. . . . Calculation was improved and conflict limited by this incremental, remedial, and serial approach.”

For the first two stages of the ABM fight, we saw incremental budget battles waged in the executive branch. The unspoken yet very real political imperative to give each of the services a role in the key mission of the era helped ensure that the Army would be given a piece of strategic deterrence, a decision that helped to ensure the service’s ABM programs would survive. At the same time, the Air Force’s ambivalence toward the defense helped ensure that ABM would not advance too quickly: without unanimous support from the chiefs, such an expensive system could never rise to the top of the Pentagon’s priority list. In the next period, Secretary McNamara’s centralization of power in OSD and the Vietnam-driven disintegration of civil-military relations offset one another, ensuring that neither side could attain complete advantage. When President Johnson finally green-lighted the deployment of Sentinel, the ABM would at last proceed,

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but even then not in the way its proponents wished. Still, the differences at each inflection point primarily centered on departures from the base: the questions were whether to boost or reduce research and development, or whether to proceed with or postpone deployment – not whether to commit to the program or cancel it.

In the third stage, the debate shifted to the Congress, and the question appears to have become more existential. Because Wildavsky’s “classical era” drew to a close around the same time that Safeguard was deactivated, it creates the impression of correlation. But the reality is quite the contrary. The Congressional debate over missile defense was public and divisive, but it took more than six years to be fully resolved. And Congress acted in an incremental manner throughout, as Sentinel was killed and replaced with Safeguard; as deployment of Safeguard to just two sites was approved; as a third site was added the following year; and ultimately, after the ABM treaty, when research and development funding for missile defense survived the cancellation of the Safeguard program. Here too, the system worked as it should: rather than making a one-time strategic judgment about the future of ABM, Congress dealt with the issue gradually, year over year. It did so not because any individual member might have preferred it that way, but rather because the inertia inherent in the system required it.

Though this sort of examination reveals the subtle successes of the incrementalist system, the much more obvious inefficiencies led budgetary reformers in the 1970s and defense reformers in the 1980s to seek a more efficient system. The outcome was the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 and the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986. The results of those reforms seem
decidedly mixed: the decay of the budget process provides a stark contrast with the more successful shift toward joint military operations driven by Goldwater-Nichols. However, the reality is more nuanced: the Congressional Budget Act has some underrated successes, and Goldwater-Nichols has actually fallen short in some ways. The politics surrounding each reform have had a significant impact on their perceived success or failure.

The Department of Defense: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

As discussed before, the history of the Department of Defense is filled with complex power struggles between the services and between the Secretary’s office and the service chiefs. The interservice rivalries in particular worsened over time, leading to military shortcomings in Vietnam and outright failure in the 1980 Iran hostage rescue operation. In 1982, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and the Chief of Staff of the Army both spoke out publicly about the need to reform the structure of the joint staff. In the aftermath of perceived underperformance in Grenada, serious talk of reform began in the Congress, with hearings and consideration of legislative proposals proceeding over several years in the Senate and House Armed Services Committees. After concluding that the problems with interservice rivalry dated back at least to World War II, the Chairmen of the Senate and House Armed Services Committees united to write a bill that sought to reshape the Department of Defense around the concept of “jointness.”

Key provisions of the legislation were intended to unify the chain of command from operational commanders in the field to the President of the United States by

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designating the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs as the principal military advisor to the Secretary of Defense and the President and making regional combatant commanders the primary operational advisors. Service chiefs were relegated to the role of ensuring their service’s forces were properly trained and equipped. Several reforms were included to reward joint service through promotion guidelines, including a requirement that an officer undertake at least one joint tour prior to promotion to general or flag officer rank.³

More than a quarter-century later, Goldwater-Nichols is considered a resounding success. In 2004, General Peter Pace, who was then the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, called for “a Goldwater-Nichols for the inter-agency” to improve cooperation between the Pentagon and other executive branch agencies. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review credited the requirements legislated by Goldwater-Nichols with helping to integrate the military services into an effective joint force.⁴ Of course, challenges do remain, particularly with regard to duplicative headquarters staff and procurement. A 2011 Government Accountability Office report identified seven separate areas of duplication or redundancy within the Department of Defense that cost the government billions, including in medical command structures; tactical vehicles; business operations; and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions.⁵ These areas of duplication – in particular in ISR, one of the military’s key missions for the past decade –

³ Ibid., 2-3.


demonstrate that service rivalries are not dead. The competition for budget share is perhaps less overt than it was in the 1950s, but it continues.

Moreover, while the Department of Defense has for the most part always enjoyed consensus political support, a key component of the Senate Armed Services Committee report on the Goldwater-Nichols legislation is a commentary on the need for concurrent Congressional reforms to allow the Department to become more efficient. While such reforms “cannot be readily legislated … steps can be taken to introduce underlying changes.” The Committee appealed to the Congress as a whole to reduce micro-management, shift from a focus on “budget inputs” to “operational outputs,” and reinforce a joint approach to defense programs. It also set forth steps to accomplish these goals, including a shift to biennial budgeting at the Department and a change to the Committee’s approach to oversight hearings. But ultimately, the report notes:

Reform must extend beyond the confines of defense oversight. Ultimately, fundamental patterns of congressional behavior must change. Committee jurisdictions must be reasserted and tightened to minimize overlap and duplication. Redundant legislative phases of budgeting, authorizing, and appropriating must be consolidated. The orderly process of deliberation within committees, rather than unending floor amendments, must again become customary in the Senate. The Committee is prepared to take the necessary steps in its own procedures to begin changes that ultimately must be made by the entire Congress.6

These calls for broader Congressional responsiveness fell on deaf ears. The Goldwater-Nichols reforms focused on process within the military were for the most part successful, but appeals for Congressional reforms failed. This suggests the problem of Congressional inefficiency cannot be fixed through process reform, a conclusion affirmed by the outcome of the reforms enacted through the Congressional Budget Act.

6 Senate Armed Services, Department of Defense Reorganization Act, 11-12.
Reformers advanced the concepts included in the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 to help resolve conflicts between executive branch agencies. Likewise, the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974 was passed in recognition of the worsening relationship between the executive and legislative branches. This deterioration had several process-related causes: in the post-war years, presidents were increasingly able to use their budget proposals to set the terms of debate, a bully pulpit Congress had difficulty matching; moreover, the Vietnam guns-and-butter battle and growing entitlement spending were exploding deficits. Perhaps the largest aggravating factor was that presidents were increasingly refusing to spend appropriated funds – a remarkable challenge to the principle that the Congress decides how money should be spent that would be addressed in the 1974 Act by making impoundment a crime.7

The Congressional Budget Act created a process for Congress to independently establish its own budget, enhancing the “Congress disposes” part of the 1921 formulation. The Act created a process by which the Congress would annually pass a joint resolution setting out a broad plan for revenue and spending, and capping discretionary spending in each of 20 budget categories, known as functions. The legislation would be drafted by the newly-created House and Senate Budget Committees with assistance from the new Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the legislative branch counterpart to OMB.8

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7 Schick, Federal Budget, 17-18.

8 Ibid., 19, 118-120.
But even though the Congressional Budget Act created a new independent role for Congress in the budget process, it did nothing to reduce the role of the president. By simply adding new procedures on top of the old, the reforms did more to ingrain the growing conflicts into law as it did to resolve them. Moreover, in order to receive buy-in from members serving on appropriations and revenue committees, reformers seeking a strong new power center to enforce budget discipline had to make some compromises that weakened the effectiveness of the new committees – most notably, even though they had to attain majority support for their resolution, virtually every power of enforcement granted with the Resolution’s approval could be waived by a three-fifths vote. Moreover, as Wildavsky points out, Congress would not punish itself for a failure to comply with the requirement that it pass a budget. Therefore, “Members would follow the budget act’s rules only if they wanted to do so; they would want to do so only if they valued the process itself more than they valued what they would lose if they obeyed the act.”

What was perhaps not realized in 1974 was that the institutional conflict was not at its heart a process problem. Conflicts over the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the culture war were all tugging at the loose strings holding the post-war consensus together, and they were soon to come untied altogether. Although impoundment and deficit spending were serious issues, they were less significant in generating tension between the President and Congress than were the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. In the Johnson Administration, rosy official appraisals of the Vietnam War seemed to contrast with reality on the ground, creating a so-called

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“credibility gap” in the White House and leading Johnson to decline to run for re-election. Just six years later, Nixon resigned from office to avert a Constitutional crisis over the Watergate scandal. In some ways, the Congressional Budget Act was a direct result of Watergate – the bill was signed into law just a month before Nixon resigned, and most likely a stronger executive would have considered a veto.\textsuperscript{10}

Even as conflict flared between the President and Congress, internal tensions within the Congress itself posed the larger threat to a healthy budget process. Polarization in the body politic was reflected in Congress with the election of more liberal Democrats and more conservative Republicans. Conflict was increasingly the order of the day, and the new process was not enough to compel compromise – legislation could open the door, but could not force consensus through. As the 1970s gave way to the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s, what Wildavsky calls “the politics of dissensus” came to the fore. As the issues grew bigger – the parties took sides all at once on the questions of whether or not to cut taxes, whether or not to spend more on defense, and whether or not to spend more on other discretionary programs – the room for compromise shrank.\textsuperscript{11}

As the budget battles wore on, Congress increasingly turned to \textit{ad hoc} solutions to its problems. The Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Act of 1986 established new budget procedures to mandate deficit reduction (these were later waived) and the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 created a pay-as-you-go process and other caps to try and get a

\textsuperscript{10} Schick, \textit{Federal Budget}, 17-18.

\textsuperscript{11} Wildavsky, \textit{New Politics}, 81, 87-88.
handle on the problem. Ultimately, both helped, but neither resolved the issue. Little wonder: process reforms cannot solve a fundamentally political problem.\textsuperscript{12}

When the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s gave way to the New Democrats and Gingrich Revolution of the 1990s, each side dug in still deeper. The 1995 government shutdown proved once and for all that the \textit{de jure} process had broken down. At this stage, the Budget Committees became more occupied with enforcing the deals reached outside the regular order than in pursuing the process as it was written in legislation. Still, reformers continued to seek a process solution, with calls for a Balanced Budget Amendment, or a line-item veto, or stronger Budget Committees.\textsuperscript{13} In the aftermath of the Congressionally-made 2011 crisis over raising the debt ceiling and the passage of the Budget Control Act, the efforts to find process workarounds to political problems continue. That legislation created a unique Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction and tasked it with finding a set amount of savings. Like Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, it backed up that requirement with an automatic mechanism to sequester spending. The logic was that sequestration would force Congress to act. The effort was unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{14}

A key goal of the both the 1921 and 1974 budget process reform bills was efficiency: if the process were able to unify the efforts of the many disparate actors in the budget process and push them to budget over a longer time horizon, the government could behave more rationally and squander fewer resources. It would be unfair to deny

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 105-106.

\textsuperscript{13} Schick, \textit{Federal Budget}, 26-27, 35.

that each reform made significant improvements on the status quo. The 1921 Act created OMB, which does a far better job keeping agency budgets in line than it gets credit for, and the 1974 Act created CBO, which creates the baselines used to debate broader budget questions. If nothing else, these agencies helped set the ground rules for competition in the new arenas created to host political battles over the budget. But these improvements to process proved unable to overcome the failings of the broader political environment.

Still, given that the current system has broken down, reformers are justifiably searching for new and better methods. Allen Schick mentions lengthening the horizon of budgeting, ensuring that budget decisions are made after full consideration of their implications over a five-year, ten-year, or even thirty-year window. Another reasonable proposal he offers is to switch the process from an annual to a biennial cycle in an attempt to reduce the workload on budgeters and circumvent much of the turbulence of election-year politics.15 The Department of Defense has enjoyed significant efficiencies since Goldwater-Nichols switched its internal budget process to a biennial cycle. Along similar lines, the Department of Veterans Affairs has begun to request and receive advance appropriations in a two-year cycle to avoid interruptions due to Congressional failure to enact annual appropriations legislation on time. There is reason to believe the entire government could benefit from this approach.

Irene Rubin argues that careful monitoring of even small-scale deficit spending could nip problems in the bud, avoiding large swings in public opinion. She also suggests that alerts should be issued when budgetary secrecy increases – for instance, when

\[15\] Schick, _Federal Budget_, 315-318.
spending is moved into a classified budget, or gimmicks are used to make apparently temporary spending permanent. However, she correctly notes that reforms of this nature will be ineffective if the alarms fall on deaf ears, and therefore a good check-and-balance between the executive and legislature is required, as well as public input. Finally, she says that more research is necessary to determine the proper roles of budget technicians (career bureaucrats needed for tasks like objective evaluation of the economy and estimates of revenue and expenditures) and budget politicians (elected officials or their staffs, who should be responsible for setting priorities, rallying public support, and so on). This note comes closest to recognizing the important role of politics in budgeting.

Perhaps the best goal for those seeking reform to consider reaching is returning the United States to something closer to Wildavsky’s “classical era” of budgeting. Wildavsky himself believed in a return to relatively balanced budgets based on annual decision-making, not mandatory spending formulas and revenue preferences. Today, a shift back to these principles would be a revolution in itself. And one must once again wonder why Members of Congress would go along with such a revolution, when it has been shown that the legislature will only do so if it begins to find more value in the process than in what it stands to lose by abandoning the status quo.

Conclusion

Contrasting the apparently successful Goldwater-Nichols reforms with the apparently unsuccessful budget process reforms of the 1970s illustrates that the perceived

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17 Kettl, “Foreward,” in *New Politics*, xvi.
success or failure of process reform is driven in large part by the success or failure of the broader political system. The Pentagon has mostly enjoyed consensus political support since the end of the Cold War, whether its budgets were shrinking or growing. Even the peace dividend of the 1990s now decried by hawks was planned by President George HW Bush and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney before it was executed by President Bill Clinton. By contrast, broader questions of revenue policy, mandatory spending, and the role of government have all been subject to fierce partisan conflict. The result is that the Goldwater-Nichols reforms to the Department of Defense are largely perceived as effective whereas the Congressional Budget Act is seen as largely unsuccessful.

The reality is not so simple. The defense budget process is indeed successful in premise, yet somewhat flawed in execution – but to a much lesser degree than the budget process as a whole. Goldwater-Nichols brought enough process reform to the Pentagon to resolve the worst issues of interservice rivalries and civilian-military conflict, but not enough to overcome the institutional imperatives that contribute to service redundancy and overlap to this day. The Congressional Budget Act brought enough process reform to reestablish the primacy of Congress in the federal budget process and introduce CBO as an objective referee of budget disputes, but not enough to overcome Congressional inability to reach agreement on the larger political questions that must be resolved before a return to the incrementalist consensus budgeting of the “classical era” can be successful. The success of the two reforms, then, is not that different – the issue is that of degree. The failures, limited in one case and extreme in the other, are primarily the result of broader political imperatives, not shortcomings in process.
CONCLUSION

As a case study, the Safeguard program helps to illuminate the interplay between the budget process and American democracy. While the decision to deploy and then cancel Safeguard on its face appears to be a classic Defense Department boondoggle, the reality is more complex. What is most well-known about the program is the politicized debate in Congress over its deployment, but in reality those debates were only the last step in a decades-long fight over missile defense. Those fights, driven by Pentagon organizational political battles over the new nuclear mission and by McNamara’s efforts to strengthen the Secretary’s office, suggest that leaving budget decisions in the hands of the bureaucrats is no more effective than letting Congress decide. Indeed, for all its inefficiencies (and the decaying pyramid on the prairie proves they are legion), the Congress ultimately did the right thing: the Soviet Union only agreed to negotiate SALT and the ABM Treaty after Congress approved the deployment of Safeguard, and once the treaty was ratified the Congress walked away from the system. Those agreements ultimately ensured that it would be America’s strategic theory of Mutual Assured Destruction that underpinned the Cold War, not the Soviet Union’s dialectical approach that would have balanced offensive and defensive arms. Perhaps most importantly, the debates in Congress were the result of the direct democratic attention that arose when the Sentinel proposal set out to put nuclear-armed missiles in suburban backyards, and the decisions made ultimately reflected the will of the American people.

Even though no responsible strategist would intentionally plan a program that proceeded quite the way Safeguard did, the Congressional debate over deployment did
ultimately accomplish the strategic goals of the United States, however indirectly. Moreover, it is incredibly difficult to discern the “right” path for missile defense, or any other program, in real time. Long-term planning of defense programs is fundamentally impossible without perfect transparency into the motives of adversaries. The Soviet system allowed its army to rapidly deploy an ABM system, and the result was that the USSR built a system several years before the United States using technology very similar to the flawed Nike-Zeus system America chose not to deploy. The system still exists today. Ultimately, even with the benefit of hindsight, most American strategists would likely not have traded Safeguard for Galosh.

What does this mean for those who seek to improve the efficiency of government through process reform? It certainly presents tremendous challenges. Efforts at reform generally seek to replace the Congressional focus on short-term political pressures with more attention to long-term strategy – as evidenced by the Senate Armed Services Committee report on the Goldwater-Nichols reforms, which complained that Congress was caught up in micromanagement rather than broader strategic thought. The common belief is that a longer-term perspective would insulate important decisions from day-to-day political pressures, and efforts have certainly been made to push the budget process in that direction over time. From appropriations down to the line-item in the early days of the Republic to centralizing power in the President’s Bureau of the Budget in the early 20th century to considering top-line totals as well as appropriations legislation through the Budget Act, the trend has been to try and make the budget process more orderly and more centralized.
Ironically, the trend toward centralization and big-picture thinking may have actually made budgeting more difficult by increasing the stakes and intensity of the political fights surrounding the budget. Aaron Wildavsky called the period between World War II and the mid-1970s the “classical era” of budgeting, one in which a small group of experts fought over incremental change to the budget. Today, a much larger group fights much more fiercely over much larger changes, in part because the debate has shifted from particulars to the broader long-term question about the proper role of government.

At last, we return to the key point: inefficiencies and failures occur not because federal budgeting is inherently political; but rather, because of problems with the politics themselves. To the Founders, a budget system driven by politics is a goal to be sought, not a problem to be solved. The Founders were more concerned with whether the system they were constructing would be responsive to the people than how efficient it would be. Though they would likely be dismayed with the current state of affairs, they would be appalled by suggestions that the United States ought to enact further reforms to give the executive branch bureaucracy the power to ignore the will of voters.

Moreover, even the most well-planned process reform cannot overcome flaws in the broader political sphere. Wildavsky explains that “the budgetary process is an arena in which the struggle for power over public policy is worked out.”\(^1\) As long as the country lacks consensus over the proper size and role of government and the right amount of revenue it should raise to fund its operations, the struggle will be focused on these big-

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\(^1\) Wildavsky, *New Politics*, 205.
picture issues, and successful execution of process will prove elusive. No amount of reforming the process can force the Congress to follow its own rules. Reformers can improve the ground rules for the game, but they cannot determine its outcome. The only way to do so would be to begin to strip Congress of the power of the purse entirely, which would in turn call to question one of the foundational principles of the American Constitutional system.

Again, the question is begged whether successful process reform is possible without upending the democratic balance of power outlined by the Founders. In the end, we must conclude that it is not. Despite the best efforts of reformers to improve the budget process, inefficiencies have only grown. That is not an indictment of the reforms, for the process is in theory better today than it has ever been. This is an indictment of the execution – the politics that determine how the process is used. The process is only the arena in which political battles are fought. If we seek more efficient government, it is politics, not process, that will have to change.


