

*It is Time to Start Talking about Mitt: Mitt Romney and the
Issue of Missile Defence*

Dr. Matthew Trudgen

In the weeks since he has secured the Republican Presidential Nomination, Mitt Romney has gone from being a long shot challenger for the presidency to being a legitimate contender. The result is that it is now time to discuss what a Romney presidency could mean for the Canada, and one issue that could surface as flash point in the bilateral relationship is ballistic missile defence (BMD). Consequently, it is important to ask the question of what level of interest will a President Romney have in this issue. This article argues that Romney will be a strong supporter of expanding America's missile defences for a number of reasons.

One factor is the issues perceived popularity with the American people.¹ While many U.S. foreign policy elites as well as academics have expressed concern about both

¹ There is some evidence that support for missile defence in the United States is not as wide spread as most politicians and commentators believe. For example, a Cable News Network (CNN)/Opinion Research Corporation Poll from December 17 to 19, 2010 of 1,008 people nationwide asked: "Some people feel that the U.S. should try to develop a ground- and space-based missile defense system to protect the U.S. from missile attack. Others opposed such an effort because they say it would be too costly and might intervene with existing arms treaties with the Russians. Which comes closer to your view?" The answer was 47 percent agreed that the United States "should try to develop" a missile defence system while 50 percent believed that the U.S "should not try to develop" such a system. Three percent were unsure and the poll had a margin of error of plus or minus three percent. *CNN/Opinion Research*

the feasibility of such a defence system as well as its cost, the average American is seen to be supportive of the effort to protect the United States from ballistic missiles. Indeed, both the Clinton and Obama administrations have funded the development of missile defences, albeit on a lesser scale than their Republican counterparts for this reason.² In a close election, Romney will seek any issue to give him an advantage over Obama. Moreover, given the very strong likelihood that a Romney victory will be narrow, he will seek out issues that will be popular after his inauguration.

It should also be noted that Obama has given Romney a small opening with his comments to then Russian President and current Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev on March 26, 2012 that he will have more “flexibility” to deal with this issue after the election.³ The 2012 Republican Platform even directly refers to this incident, and argues that the Obama administration “to appease Russia,” will seek to further undermine “our missile defense capabilities.” The platform added that “a Republican President will be honest and forthright with the American people about his policies and plans and not whisper promises to authoritarian leaders.”⁴ Furthermore, in May, the Republicans have proposed a bill in Congress that would establish a BMD site on the East Coast “to undercut President Obama’s national-security credentials.”⁵

Corporation Poll, December 17-19, 2010, <http://www.pollingreport.com/defense.htm>, (Accessed July 15, 2012).

² One commentator has even noted that when “Obama’s position on missile defense, which in the 1980s would have put him in Reagan’s camp, is the farthest ‘left’ that a mainstream politician is allowed to go, something is very badly amiss.” Mark Adomanis, “Mitt Romney’s Russia Problem,” *Forbes*, May 12 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2012/05/12/mitt-romneys-russia-problem>, (Accessed July 15 2012).

³ Kathleen Hennessey and Paul Richter, “Obama’s Missile Defense Chat with Russia’s Medvedev Stirs Critics,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/mar/27/world/la-fg-obama-open-microphone-20120327>, (Accessed September 6 2012). Uri Friedman, *American exceptionalism, and other key lines in the GOP platform*, http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/08/27/american_exceptionalism_and_other_key_lines_in_the_gop_platform (Accessed August 27 2012). These comments were supposed to be private, but they became public knowledge when their discussion was picked up by a microphone that had been left on.

⁴ *2012 Republican Platform*, http://www.gop.com/2012-republican-platform_Exceptionalism/#Item6, (Accessed August 29 2012).

⁵ Jeremy Herb, “GOP plans East Coast missile defence shield to counter Iranian nuclear threat,” *The Hill Times*, May 8 2012, <http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/policy-and-strategy/226265-republican-plans-east-coast-missile-defense-shield>, (Accessed July 20 2012).

Another important consideration is missile defence's identification as a conservative issue. This reality has not always been the case, as some of the most important supporters of strategic defences in the 1940s and 1950s were scientists who sought to provide an alternative to a reliance on offensive nuclear forces for the security of the United States.⁶ One example was J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had headed the Manhattan project.⁷ James Killian, the President of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) later noted that some of the individuals who supported improved continental air defences had previously been involved in the development of the atomic bomb and had sought to assuage this guilt by taking "refuge in the Maginot line complex of an idealized defense system."⁸ However, by the mid-1960s, this support had largely dissipated due to the development of the strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which promised strategic stability between the two superpowers. Consequently, most of these formerly strong supporters of strategic defences turned against these weapon systems, as they would interfere with MAD by potentially allowing one superpower to survive a nuclear exchange, which would negate the whole concept of MAD. Since by this time air defences had ceased to be a major priority due to the emergence of the intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), missile defence became a major problem for these individuals.⁹

As a result, it was left to groups on the right of the political spectrum to defend these defences. These included traditional conservatives such as Senator Strom Thurmond (R-South Carolina) and individuals who would become known as the neo-

⁶ Gregg Herken, *Counsels of War* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

⁷ Oppenheimer's support of improved continental air defences would later be used against him to demonstrate that he was a security risk. *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: Transcript of a Hearing before Personnel Security Board*, Washington D.C., 12 April—6 May, United States Government Printing Office (USGPO), p. 749; Joseph Alsop and Adam Platt, *I've Seen the Best of It* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), p. 353; Alan Needell, *Science, Cold War and the American State: Lloyd V. Berkner and the Balance of Professional Ideals* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 228; Joseph Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs Canada, The United States and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1987), pp. 67-68.

⁸ Quoted from David Goldfisher, *The Best Defense: Policy Alternatives for U.S. Nuclear Strategy from the 1950s to the 1990s* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 138.

⁹ Some of these scientists and academics along with Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) would produce an anti-ABM volume in 1969. *ABM: An Evaluation of the Decision to Deploy an Antiballistic Missile System*, ed. Abram Chayes and Jerome Bert Wiesner (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

Conservatives. Missile defences also received the support of traditional Cold Warriors such as Paul Nitze, who would later serve as in the Reagan administration.¹⁰

These two perspectives would clash in an extensive public debate over the Safeguard anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system in 1969 and 1970. Ultimately, the funding for Safeguard would be approved by the Senate by one vote on August 6, 1969, but the dream of an American missile shield was temporarily ended by the Nixon administration when it decided that these defences would be used a bargaining chip in arms control negotiations with the Russians.¹¹ Consequently, in 1972, the United States and the Soviet Union agreed to the ABM treaty. Although, this agreement did allow the United States to deploy limited number of ABM launchers, in 1976, the U.S. Congress cut off funding for Safeguard due in part to concerns about its effectiveness as well as their desire to reduce defence expenditures. This decision meant that the one missile defence complex operational at Grand Forks Air Force Base (AFB), North Dakota was closed down. These defences did retain the support of figures on the right such as Senator Malcolm Wallop (R-Wyoming), who would continue to push this concept; nonetheless, it was not until the presidency of Ronald Reagan that this issue would both re-emerge and would become truly identified with conservatives.¹²

Reagan became supportive of missile defence because of numerous factors, including his strong anti-communist sentiments and his belief that the United States needed to increase defence spending in order to push the Soviet Union economically.¹³ Some of his supporters have further argued that his support for missile defence was driven by Reagan's belief these systems would "catalyze the total elimination of nuclear weapons," one of his major goals¹⁴ Other Reaganites, namely Martin Anderson, claim that Reagan was inspired by a visit to the headquarters of the North American Air

¹⁰ During this debate, Nitze would form an organization called the Committee for a Prudent Defense Policy to rally support for Safeguard. It would later serve as the model for the much more prominent Committee on the Present Danger that Nitze helped to form in 1976 to argue for more robust American foreign and defence policies in the Cold War.

¹¹ Richard Dean Burns, *The Missile Defense Systems of George W. Bush: A Critical Assessment* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), pp. 23-24.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

¹³ Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2006), pp. 16-17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. x.

Defence Command (NORAD) in July 1979 when he was told by the NORAD Commander-in-Chief, General James Hill that while NORAD could detect an attack by ICBMs on the United States, it could not stop it.¹⁵ According to Anderson, on the plane ride home to Los Angeles, Reagan concluded that the United States “should have some way of defending ourselves from nuclear missiles.”¹⁶ However, some observers such as Frances Fitzgerald have argued that Reagan was inspired by Hollywood, in particular one film that Reagan starred in called “Murder in the Air.” This movie, which was made during the London Blitz in 1940, featured a new secret weapon called the “Inertia Projector” which could destroy enemy aircraft.¹⁷ Some academics have also suggested that Reagan utilized the idea of a missile shield as part of an effort to counter the nuclear freeze movement that emerged in the early-1980s due to the renewed fears of a major conflict between the Western alliance and the Soviet bloc.¹⁸

Whatever the reason, on March 23, 1983, Reagan announced the creation of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) that would “achieve our ultimate goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles.” He added that SDI “could pave the way for arms control measures to eliminate the weapons themselves.”¹⁹ This program, which would later be called “Star Wars” by its critics, would never come to fruition due in part to the great technical challenges of developing such a system as well as the end of the Cold War; nonetheless, it did firmly attach the issue of missile defence to Reagan’s legacy, which meant that conservatives, who were already inclined to support these defences, became even stronger enthusiasts. BMD would also become a way for Republican politicians to publically associate themselves with Reagan.

¹⁵ Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), p. 23.

¹⁶ Quoted from *Ibid*, p. 20.

¹⁷ Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution: 1980-1989* (New York: Random House Digital, Inc., 2010), pp. 291-3, Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, p. 23. In addition, Fitzgerald noted that Reagan could have been influenced by another movie, the 1966 Alfred Hitchcock film “Torn Curtain.” She added that some of Reagan’s aides noticed that the President’s first address about missile defence in March 1983 was similar to the speech that Paul Newman gave in this movie.

¹⁸ Hayward, *Age of Reagan*, pp. 291-3.

¹⁹ *President Reagan’s SDI Speech*, March 23 1983, <http://www.atomicarchive.com/Docs/Missile/Starwars.shtml>. (Accessed August 28 2012).

Therefore, even after the Cold War ended, conservative politicians continued to support these weapon systems. These efforts received a boost during the first Persian Gulf War in 1991 when U.S. Patriot surface-to-missiles appeared to be effective against Iraqi Scud surface-to-surface missiles, although it was later admitted that the Patriots were ineffective due to the fact that the Scuds were too fast for the Patriots to track. Furthermore, these Iraqi missiles usually broke up in flight, which made them very difficult to hit.²⁰ As a result, President George H.W. Bush proposed the Global Protection against Limited Strikes (GPALS) program.²¹ Moreover, after Bush's defeat in 1992, the Republicans continued to call for the development of a missile defence system, as figures such as the former (and future) Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, raised the issue of the rogue states such as North Korea and Iran acquiring long range missiles. Consequently, while the Clinton administration did make an effort to develop a BMD system, the Republicans were prepared to do more, and when George W. Bush was elected president in 2000, missile defence was one of their top priorities. The party's platform stated that a Republican president would "deploy a national missile defense [not only] for reasons of national security; but he will also do so because there is a moral imperative involved." The result was that the administration abrogated the ABM Treaty with Russia. Then, in 2004, it deployed BMD launchers at Fort Greeley, Alaska.²² Thus, because of this issues popularity with conservatives and particular, its link with Reagan, Romney both as nominee and as president will be inclined to strongly support this program to boost his conservative credentials. Indeed, this need to prove that he is "real" conservative has and will continue to be a major preoccupation for Romney.²³

There is one other factor that will influence Romney's position on missile defence and that is his preoccupation with Russia. Part of this stance is undoubtedly driven by his desire to seek political advantage, and I have already referred to the reference in the 2012 Republican Platform to Obama's "flexibility" comment to Medvedev; nonetheless,

²⁰ Roger Handberg, *Ballistic Missile Defense and the Future of American Security: Agendas, Perceptions, Technology, and Policy* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002), 6. These missiles were Soviet built Scud-Bs, which were modified by the Iraqis to extend their range.

²¹ James Fergusson, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954-2009: Déjà Vu All Over Again* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2010), p. 2.

²² Joan Johnson-Freese, *Space as a Strategic Asset* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 125-6.

²³ One example of this effort was Romney's selection of Congressman Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) to be his Vice Presidential running mate.

Romney's attitude is more than simple political expediency. In fact, his views are notable for their vehemence to the point that he has referred to Russia as "America's top geopolitical adversary," a stance that has been criticized by some Republican foreign policy experts, including the former Secretary of State, Colin Powell.²⁴ Moreover, commentators have mentioned Romney's strong belief that international affairs are a zero-sum game and have even suggested that Romney believes that he can "win" the U.S.-Russian relationship.²⁵ The combination of these views as well as Russian President Vladimir Putin's opposition to BMD, particularly a system located in Europe, will likely lead to Romney striking a strong position on this issue to demonstrate his resolve. For example, he has already criticised the Obama administration's decision to scrap the proposed BMD system in Eastern Europe.²⁶ Furthermore, in his acceptance speech this August, Romney argued that Obama has "abandoned our friends in Poland by walking away from our missile defense commitments, but is eager to give Russia's President Putin the flexibility he desires, after the election. Under my administration, our friends will see more loyalty, and Mr. Putin will see a little less flexibility and more backbone."²⁷

It is thus clear that President Mitt Romney will be a strong supporter of ballistic missile defence for reasons of political expediency, to gain the support of conservatives and to link himself with Reagan's legacy in addition to his strong views on Russia. It is also evident that this support will have policy implications for Canada, as it is very likely that he will consider approaching the Canadian government to reverse Prime Minister Paul Martin's decision to say no on BMD in 2005. However, it is too early to

²⁴ Richard, A. Opiel, "Some G.O.P. Foreign Policy Experts Are Tepid on Romney," *New York Times*, May 30, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/31/us/politics/republican-foreign-policy-establishment-slow-to-embrace-romney.html?pagewanted=all>, (Accessed July 25, 2012). Powell's exact quote was "'Come on, Mitt — think. It isn't the case.'"

²⁵ Richard A. Opiel Jr., *Romney's Adversarial View of Russia Stirs Debate*, May 1 2012, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/12/us/politics/romneys-view-of-russia-sparks-debate.html?pagewanted=all>, (Accessed July 15 2012); Adomanis, "Mitt Romney's Russia Problem." Romney has also stated that his business experience will make him a better international negotiator than Obama.

²⁶ Opiel, "Romney's Adversarial View of Russia Stirs Debate."

²⁷ *Transcript: Mitt Romney's Acceptance Speech*, August 30 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/08/30/160357612/transcript-mitt-romneys-acceptance-speech>, (Accessed September 6 2012).

tell whether Romney will win the election, and any discussion of this issues impact on the Canada-U.S. relationship will have to wait until after November 6, 2012.