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Dream-Filled Missile Silos

The Pentagon is foolishly racing to deliver on President Bush's grandiose 2000 campaign promise to have a still unproven, money-munching missile defense system deployed in time for the November election. It's supposed to provide protection against incoming ballistic missiles. But, so far, the rush into the old "Star Wars" dream amounts to an extravagant political shield.

The administration's obstinate intent is to fill the first silos in Alaska as early as this summer, even though the complex project — a composite of 10 separate systems for high-tech defense — is years from being fully tested or built. Plagued with cost overruns and technical failures, the overall missile defense program's main feat of rocketry has been its price tag: roughly \$130 billion already spent, and \$53 billion planned for the next five years.

Mr. Bush ought to pay attention to the powerful advice just offered by a group of 49 retired generals and admirals who say he should shelve his fantasy start-up plan. They urge that the money for that project be spent instead on bolstering antiterrorist defenses at American ports, borders and nuclear weapons depots. As things stand now, the administration is again looking for showy but questionable ways to reinforce Mr. Bush's identity as a wartime president, while ignoring sensible and effective low-tech strategies to reinforce homeland security.

There is no denying the theoretical virtue of a missile shield, considering the threat that North Korea or some other rogue nation may eventually present to the United States mainland. But the retired brass, who served in the highest precincts of the Pentagon, argue sensibly that the money for the project scheduled for early deployment, \$3.7 billion of the \$10.2 billion the president plans to spend next year for missile-shield projects, should be diverted to protecting parts of the American mainland that could be vulnerable to terrorist attacks.

Making a show of rushing missile shield components into place before they are required, to complete a system that may not work anyway, is a Potemkin defense. It invites more of the cost overruns and test failures that have bedeviled the program. The Pentagon had to tell Congress last week of another round of setbacks in developing one piece of the Star Wars puzzle: an infrared satellite system crucial to the project. This will mean more lost time and higher costs for an oft-revamped plan that even Pentagon analysts have called a "case study" for how not to build a complex space project. Voters paying for this buy-now, fly-later dream deserve realistic planning and candor, not another slice of political pie in the sky.