

# Missile base hopes shot down

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By Philip Brasher

ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — The Clinton administration dealt a potentially fatal blow Wednesday to hopes for resurrecting North Dakota's abandoned antimissile site.

□ Nekoma's boom days, like its missile site, are long gone/B16

The Defense Department proposed Wednesday to shelve plans for deploying a system near Nekoma, N.D., to defend the nation against long-range nuclear attacks. The Pentagon plan would relegate the system to a research project.

Defense Secretary Les Aspin said the nation's more urgent need is for an improved "theater" missile defense system for use in war zones against short-range missiles like the Iraqi Scud.

"Basically what we have is a near-term problem of theater ballistic missile threat to the United States allies, friends, and American forces stationed abroad," Aspin said.

"A longer-term threat is the threat to the continental United States from intercontinental ballistic missiles, and that one depends upon the development of that capability by a whole bunch of countries that are looking at it but do not have that capability now."

Aspin proposed to spend \$12 billion from 1995-1999 on theater defense and just \$3 billion on the

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National Missile Defense program.

The proposed Nekoma system still has some strong supporters in Congress, most notably Sen. Sam Nunn, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

But critics of the program said the Pentagon plan condemns it to a slow death. The program has come under increasing attack in Congress because of its cost and questions about whether it is needed or will even work.

"Once you withdraw substantial amounts of money the program is going to be like a plant that lacks water," said Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D.

"Depending on whether the threat (of nuclear attack) to the United States changes it may never be deployed," said Ken Luongo, an analyst for the Union of Concerned Scientists.

The missile defense recommendations are part of the administration's five-year strategy for overhauling the nation's armed forces in view of the changing world situation.

The Pentagon put off making decisions about the nation's nuclear defense structure that could have a far greater impact on North Dakota's economy than whether the Nekoma system is deployed.

Depending on how many Minuteman III missiles the administration decides to keep, either the Grand Forks or Minot air bases could be recommended for closure.

Aspin said the Pentagon is conducting a separate study of nuclear forces.

In the meantime, the \$20 billion National Missile Defense program is about all that is left of President Reagan's dream for a space-based "Star Wars" system to defend against nuclear attacks.

Plans developed two years ago called for installing 100 interceptors at the antimissile base near Nekoma that was abandoned during the 1970s.

It is the only antimissile site allowed the United States under a treaty with the former Soviet Union.

Congress had wanted to deploy the ground-based system by 1996. Earlier this year, the Clinton administration put off the deployment date until at least 2004.

Even that was in doubt after the release Wednesday of the Pentagon's long-range strategy.

"I don't think it's any surprise to anybody up here," said Raymond Heck, the mayor of Nekoma. "I don't think we ever really thought the thing was going to amount to anything again."