

DEFENSE

Round 2 on ABM

When the Administration won its fight in Congress last year to begin the Safeguard anti-ballistic missile system, one ingredient of victory was President Nixon's pledge to review the ABM program annually. No one doubted, however, that the initial two sites approved were only the first steps toward a steadily growing complex. Last week Defense Secretary Melvin Laird went to Congress with plans for a "modified Phase 2," a gingerly expansion of Safeguard.

It had also seemed in 1969 that once the first stage of Safeguard had squeezed through the Senate by a one-vote majority, making the program an accomplished fact, future opposition would diminish. That assumption is not holding up so well. Though the Pentagon wants to go ahead at a slower pace

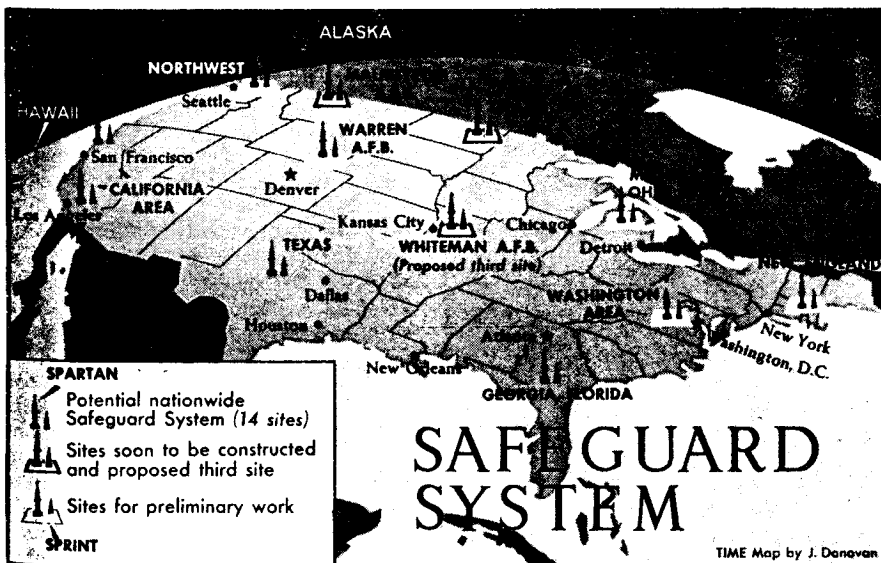
necessity and technical efficacy persist, but Laird pressed hard last week in its defense. His strongest argument is that American offensive missiles must be protected, at least partially, from a possible surprise attack by Russia's growing nuclear force. "The Soviets," said Laird, "are continuing the rapid deployment of major strategic offensive-weapons systems at a rate that could, by the mid-1970s, place us in a secondary strategic position with regard to the future security of the free world."

That the Russians are multiplying their land-based and submarine-borne missile force more rapidly than the U.S. is not disputed. What is less certain is whether Moscow will attempt to surpass Washington in total number of offensive nuclear warheads. But Laird feels that, for safety's sake, the U.S. must assume that Russia will try just that.

The Administration is also relying in-

lion since the crucial Senate vote last year; full deployment is now pegged at \$12.4 billion. Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard attributes the increase to design changes, inflation and stretching out completion of the system until the late 1970s.

Senator Edward Kennedy, who opposed Safeguard last year, said last week the actual price tag could run to more than \$25 billion. One liberal Republican Senator observed that it was politically foolish to have "a second round of ABM at exactly the time they're cutting school funds." With Congress hypersensitive to domestic needs in an election year, some 1969 defenders of ABM are doubtful about the 1970 proposal. Among them are Rhode Island's Senator John Pastore, who still backs the idea but wants the system installed and tested at the first two sites before any more money is put into it, and Washington's Senator Henry Jackson, who feels politically vulnerable to rising anti-ABM sentiment back home.



than originally envisioned, it faces an even tougher problem than last year in penetrating senatorial opposition. Safeguard's critics may well succeed in freezing it at its present level.

Extra Missiles. What the Pentagon already has is a congressional O.K. to build the first two missile installations and go ahead with research and development work on the intricate combination of Sprint and Spartan missiles, electronic detection systems and radar guidance apparatus that make up the Safeguard package. What Laird asked for last week was extra money for a third ABM site at Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo., further investment in technical refinements, extra missiles at the two bases already approved, and acquisition of land for five more sites being out across the U.S. Laird wants Congress to authorize \$1.5 billion on top of the \$759 million he got for Safeguard last year. The new money would be spent over several years. Eventually, all Safeguard system would include 14 ABM sites (see map).

Doubts about Safeguard's strategic

creasingly on the argument that the U.S. must have ABM as what Laird called "a most important bargaining tool" in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) with the Soviets when the sessions resume in Vienna next month. The U.S. SALT delegation came back from the opening round in Helsinki convinced that little obsesses the Soviets more than what the U.S. is up to in the ABM department. Hence the strategists' firm conclusion that the U.S. needs an ongoing program to induce the Russians to bargain seriously.

The third and least persuasive argument is the possibility of an ICBM attack from China. Laird proclaimed that the Chinese may have "an initial ICBM capability" as early as 1973. But one of his experts quietly conceded that the Chinese gambit is weak. "I don't see how we can bring that one back to life," he admitted. "We buried it pretty deeply last year."

Election Pressures. Worse still for the Administration's prospects, the Pentagon's estimate of Safeguard's overall eventual price has gone up by \$1.6 bil-