

9-14-2001

Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense as Obsession: A Psychological Hypothesis

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2001) "Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense as Obsession: A Psychological Hypothesis," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 11 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol11/iss11/1>

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Title: Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense as Obsession: A Psychological Hypothesis

Author: Editor

Volume: 11

Issue: 11

Date: 2001-09-14

Keywords: Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense, Obsession

Abstract. This article presents a psychological rationale for extremely strong support of an anti-ballistic missile defense.

The case against the United States Government's (USG) initiative to deploy an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense appears to be an extremely strong one. The financial cost threatens other important priorities within and outside of the USG budget. The financial cost also may threaten many aspects of fiscal and monetary planning that may have negative consequences for optimal USG economic viability. The technological challenge is daunting and deemed to be virtually impossible by Nobel Prize-winning physicists. The strategic necessity seems extremely problematic in the face of many heterogeneous delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction and of other security threats to the USG and its allies that could not be countered by the variants of ABM defense that are currently being conceived. And the planning and development of ABM defense seem to be generating effects on the 1972 ABM Treaty, deterrence, and non-proliferation that are provocative to peace.

Yet, the USG--i.e., the Bush administration--presses on with its initiative in a manner seemingly resistant to disconfirming information. The Administration's insistence, persistence, and resistance have led ABM defense opponents to ascribe the term theological to belief systems supporting defense. Although the notion of religious war applied to a defense controversy has some merit, one might venture forth another ascription--viz., *obsessional*. This psychological term is associated with a theoretical and experimental research base that can generate intriguing heuristic notions and hypotheses bearing on tenacious support for ABM defense.

For example, many psychodynamic approaches to *obsessional* thinking posit a contributory familial constellation of a physically and/or emotionally distant father and inadequate mothering. This constellation eventually elicits a regression towards a narcissistic, blissful union with an idealized mother in the place of an identification with the father as the standard for an ego ideal. Then, if an exemplar of loss--separation from the mother--cannot be successfully managed, one may then feel any loss as intolerable and *obsessional* thinking becomes a defense against loss and its consequences. Psychobiographers and psychohistorians might wish to collect data bearing on this *obsessional* derivation in supporters and opponents of ABM defense. Clinicians with social conscience might attempt to develop persuasive techniques to shape public discourse.

As another example, *obsessives* seem to be more likely to believe that thinking about a negative event involving other people makes the event more likely to happen. ABM defense supporters as *obsessives* may very well perceive threats that can be countered by ABM defense as much more probable than ABM defense opponents and other non-*obsessives*. Again, psychobiographers, psychohistorians, and clinicians can take note.

As yet another example--this from psychoanalysis--individuals with *obsessional* certainty, as opposed to *obsessional* doubt, are dominated by cognitive inflexibility and a functional aversion to thinking related to the oedipal situation. Still other examples involve *obsessives* experiencing (1) little psychological

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difference between inner and outer perceptions--thus giving thoughts the power of actions--(2) thinking as paradoxical or conflictual action, and (3) an ossified and rigid ego structure.

Now, not all ABM supporters are obsessive, and not all opponents are not. And any person brings characteristics to a social, cultural, historical, political, and economic situation that can overwhelm individual psychology. However, the fact remains that political advocacy--including that about ABM defense--can possess a significant psychological component that ultimately involves acting in the throes of one's less than fully understood psychodynamics and standing up for and shoring up one's very existence. (See Anthi, P.R. (1989). Formal defensive aspects of cognition and modes of thinking exemplified by Freud's case history of the Rat Man. *Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 12, 22-37; Barth, F.D. (1990). Obsessional thinking as "paradoxical action." *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 54, 499-511; Cooper, S. (2000). Obsessional thinking: A defense against loss. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 16, 412-423; Meares, R. (1994). A pathology of privacy: Towards a new theoretical approach to obsessive-compulsive disorder. *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 30, 83-100; Shafran, R., Thordarson, D.S., & Rachman, S. (1996). Thought-action fusion in obsessive compulsive disorder. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 10, 379-391; Salkovskis, P.M., Forrester, E., & Richards, C. (1998). Cognitive-behavioural approach to understanding obsessional thinking. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 173, 53-63; Sodre, I. (1994). Obsessional certainty versus obsessional doubt: From two to three. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 14, 379-392.) (Keywords: Anti-Ballistic Missile Defense, Obsession.)