Pentagon claims development of 'miracle weapon'

by Susan Welsh

Soviet tanks in the Central European theater.

The Pentagon's director of research, William J. Perry, has announced that the United States is developing a new antitank weapon which will he boasts, "change the face of battle" by the beginning of the next decade.

The new weapon will neutralize the Soviet Union's overwhelming superiority in armor along the NATO front, Perry said in an interview to *The Washington Post* March 22. "They take the tank off its pedestal. They probably won't be the queen of the battlefield; just one more weapon." Perry then predicted that the impact of the new weapons would be as great as that of the airplane and radar during World War II.

Termed the millimeter wave detection system, the new weapons are expected to be deployed by the late 1980s. They will use a tiny antenna in the nose of a missile, bomb or shell to detect the metal of a nearby tank by means of radio waves. The antenna is linked to a small computer the size of a cigarette pack, which guides the projectile toward the metal target.

Perry claimed that with the new system, an infantryman can stand a mile from the tank and not worry about his aim. "He just has to aim it in the direction of the tank or cloud of smoke surrounding it." Currently deployed antitank weapons operate at such short distances that extraordinary bravery on the part of the infantryman is required, in addition to conditions of visibility which the battlefield often does not provide. Other "smart" weapons like heat-seekers and laser beams are ineffective in the rain, at night, and other adverse conditions.

A real bargain

The most telling claim the Defense Department is making for these new weapons, however, is in the realm of "cost-effectiveness." The total cost of a tank in NATO countries is nearly $1 million, all things considered, whereas a hand-held or jeep-mounted guided missile is much cheaper. Perry reported that the Pentagon may ultimately decide to buy fewer of the new heavy XM-1 main battle tanks just put into production, shifting its tank procurement allocations toward lighter, cheaper, and more maneuverable tanks that are easier to transport by air to far-flung corners of the world.

Therein lies the secret behind the Pentagon's latest "miracle weapon" announcement. The Carter administration has committed itself politically to a "rapid deployment" strike-force policy for the "projection of U.S. power" globally: in the Mideast, Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America. Under the policy of economic collapse the administration has willfully adopted via Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker's starvation of credit to industry, the United States *cannot afford* to build a rapid deployment force and at the same time restore a war-fighting capability in depth vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact.

Consequently, a public-relations campaign has been launched to persuade the American public that in-depth war-fighting capability is not necessary.

Why it won't work

The millimeter wave detection system will not work under the only conditions that count: full-scale thermonuclear war with the Warsaw Pact. Soviet military publications state frankly that the best way of dealing with the enemy's antitank weapons is full nuclear bombardment of enemy territory, paving the way for a *subsequent* tank assault. For example *Strategic Review* magazine published in its winter 1980 issue selections from a 1978 Soviet pamphlet dealing with this question. In one article, "Overcoming Anti-Tank Defense," Col. A.V. Ton-

kikh writes: "The mass use on the battlefield of antitank combat naturally also requires their mass destruction. Nuclear weapons most fully meet this requirement. They possess the greatest force of physical and moral-psychological impact and thus exert a decisive influence on the offensive. The use of nuclear weapons almost instantaneously inflicts great losses on the opponent's personnel and equipment, causes the destruction, paralysis and putting out of action of entire subunits, units and even formations, the destruction of buildings and other targets and points of resistance. Thanks to them, troops can conduct an offensive with great speed and achieve assigned goals in a short time.

"The most important characteristic of nuclear weapons, which exerts a decisive influence on the offensive, is that they are able to destroy the opponent over a large area....

"As a result of the skillful use of nuclear weapons in combination with other means of destruction, the attacking side gains in a short time the potential to change sharply the correlation of forces in its favor, to impose its will upon the defending troops, and to complete successfully their destruction by swift strikes by tank and motorized rifle units and formations. Thus, in overcoming the opponent's antitank defense, nuclear weapons will prove of decisive significance...."

Under these conditions, Perry's infantryman in his jeep or out of it would be fried to a crisp.

The nuclear bombardment sets up a plasma environment which "blacks out" the electromagnetic waves upon which these "smart weapons" realy. Furthermore, the Soviets have developed a 100 gigahertz gyrotron, a jamming device that generates electromagnetic waves capable of overpowering U.S. detection systems, according to Charles Stevens, fusion research director of the Fusion Energy Foundation.

General John Singlaub believes that the new detection system might "cut down on the threat from tanks in relatively small numbers." They would be useless against a massed tank attack, however—the only scenario Soviet military planners consider for a war in Europe.

In testimony to Congress last year, Perry himself admitted that existing U.S. TOW antitank missiles are incapable of penetrating Soviet T-64 and T-72 tanks. The Soviet tanks are equipped with a new form of armor which is highly resistant to antitank weapons, and the U.S.S.R.'s new tank in production, the T-80, is expected to have even better armor. Defense analysts expect that even improved versions of the TOW and Dragon antitank systems will be incapable of stopping the T-80, reported Drew Middleton in *The New York Times,* March 16. Given this rapid rate of Soviet technological advance, there is no reason to think that Soviet military planners are losing any sleep over Perry's latest forecasts.

Patton against the 'anti-tank conspiracy'

Since Congress outlawed the nation's infant Tank Corps in 1920, and total budget appropriations for tanks were reduced to $500, this nation has witnessed a fierce battle between the defenders and opponents of the tank.

On the eve of America's entry into World War II, this battle was still raging. General George S. Patton, Jr. led the fight against a powerful group in the War Department which insisted that the tank would become obsolete as soon as adequate counterweapons could be devised.

Patton's biographer describes how the crisis came to a head during army maneuvers in the summer and fall of 1941, while victorious German tank armies were barreling across Europe and the Soviet Union.

"A conspiracy was developing in the War Department to take the wind out of the sails of the 'armor boys' and once and for all discredit the tank as a panacea. It was no longer a secret in the inner circles of the Army that the big maneuvers ... were being deliberately rigged against armor.

"This was the cue for Patton! As soon as he learned of the conspiracy through the grapevine, he took his division through special exercises in a remote part of the Fort Benning reservation to prepare it secretly for a 'mission,' on the success of which, he ardently believed, depended the survival of armor in the Army." (Ladislas Farago, *Patton: Ordeal and Triumph,* New York, 1963.)

In the exercise, Patton's 2nd Armored Division encircled the "enemy" forces, breaking through the antitank defenses, and on Nov. 16, 1941, *captured* Lt. Gen. H. A. Drum, one of the leaders of the antitank conspiracy.

Less than a month later, the United States was at war.