

# MX is voted up, but at what price?

by Kathleen Klenetsky

After months of holding the MX program hostage, the U.S. Congress in late March approved funding for the production of 21 additional missiles. The final vote to release the \$1.5 billion in contention came March 28, when the House voted 217-210 in favor of the program.

Claimed by the administration as a major victory for its strategic modernization program, Congress's decision is anything but. Despite a massive lobbying effort by the Reagan administration, barely more than half of U.S. senators and representatives saw fit to endorse the MX, the first new intercontinental missile the U.S. has added to its arsenal in over 20 years.

A large minority on both sides of the aisle ignored the President's personal pleas, classified Pentagon briefings on the fearsome extent of the Soviet Union's missile buildup campaign, and the ominous implications of the cold-blooded murder of U.S. Army Major Arthur D. Nicholson (see page 34), to vote against the missile.

Moreover, the funds in question are actually part of the Fiscal Year 1985 budget. They have been held in escrow until now, thanks to a rotten compromise which Rep. Les Aspin, self-styled champion of the MX, had fashioned last year. That deal stipulated that the money allocated for the missile wouldn't be spent until the administration "proved" it was sincere in seeking arms-control talks with the Soviet Union. In other words, the MX had already been successfully delayed for nearly a full year.

## What price victory?

The major concern at this point is what price Congress extorted from the administration in exchange for releasing the funds.

According to knowledgeable sources, a coterie of congressmen and senators, led by Reps. Aspin and Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) and Sens. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), William Cohen (R-Maine), and Albert Gore (D-Tenn.), had told Reagan they would deliver a "yea" vote on the MX if he agreed to deep funding cuts in the FY1986 budgets for the MX and especially the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

The Aspin group, these sources report, incurred the wrath of their fellow liberals for supporting the MX because they were confident this would situate them to demand Reagan make concessions on the SDI.

At a Brookings Institution seminar on arms control March 27, Rep. Dicks admitted he had "told my liberal friends that

if they killed the MX, they would hurt my chances of getting deep cuts in the SDI in Congress." Dicks, a member of the congressional delegation observing at the Geneva talks, blasted the SDI, and expressed hopes the Soviets "will come forward with a package that will call for deep cuts in strategic weapons, and we will agree to reaffirm the ABM Treaty, limit SDI research and development, and continue to rely on MAD."

There are certain hints that some kind of *quid pro quo* between Congress and the administration on the MX/SDI may in fact be in the works. Within days of the Senate's pro-MX vote, Reagan indicated for the first time that he may be willing to accept cuts in military spending, seconding statements made by White House chief of staff Don Regan that there may be a lot of "waste" in the Pentagon budget.

Although the President continues to insist he won't permit reductions in any major weapons systems, Congress is stepping up the pressure for major concessions in these areas. Within hours of the final House vote on the MX, four leading Democratic Senators—Robert Byrd (W.Va.), Albert Gore (Tenn.), David Boren (Okla.), and Sam Nunn (Ga.)—held a press conference to announce that they will introduce legislation aimed at slashing the total number of missiles to 40. Administration plans envision deployment of 100 MXs, and construction of an additional 123 for spares and testing.

House Speaker Tip O'Neill (D-Mass.) informed newsmen that some congressmen are talking about rejecting construction of any new missiles for 1986. And Democratic majority leader Jim Wright (D-Tex.) declared: "There is a strong sense in Congress that enough is enough." Their warning was echoed by Rep. Dick Cheney, a Kissinger Republican from Wyoming, who averred, "We'll never get the 48" MXs Reagan has requested in the 1986 budget. "We've had to pull out a lot of stops on this one."

## Economic pressures

Capitol Hill foes of the MX and SDI are counting on the deepening national economic crisis to provide the ultimate argument for gouging financing for the two programs.

At the March 27 Brookings forum, Sen. William Cohen, a Maine Republican who is a leading member of the Congressional Military Reform Caucus, confidently declared that "growing economic pressures" will force the President to accept a zero-growth defense budget for 1986, with particularly sharp cuts in the SDI. "In my view, this is a program which will be cut significantly because of the economic pressures being felt on Capitol Hill," he said.

Rep. Aspin, chairman of the powerful Armed Services Committee, has hired a new hatchetman to prepare the slashing of the SDI. The aide—who appropriately enough was last employed as an economist at the State Department assigned to the IMF and Third World debt—told *EIR*, "Aspin has already put me to work on the SDI. . . . This will be our next major focus. I'm sure the President won't get anywhere near what he wants" for beam defense.