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Launching a 'homeland' defense

- To protect itself from terrorism, United States embarks on protection program reminiscent of early cold-war days.

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There is not yet an equivalent of "Bert the Turtle," a cartoon made by the US government in the 1950s to teach elementary school students about surviving a Soviet nuclear attack.

But the United States is now engaged in the most intensive self-protection drive since the civil-defense programs of those early years of the atomic age.

Instead of nationwide fallout-shelter construction and urban-evacuation plans, dozens of federal, state, and local agencies are pursuing a welter of programs - from developing a 50-state defense against limited missile strikes to shielding power grids from cybersabotage.

The military is training police, fire, and medical personnel in cities to cope with biological and chemical terrorism, and there are proposals to inoculate these "first responders" against anthrax. A national stockpile of antidotes and antibiotics is being built. The military is mulling over creating a commander for national defense, and some officials see a not-too-distant day when all Americans may be offered shots against biological-warfare agents.

Since 1995, President Clinton and the Republican-led Congress have boosted spending on these programs by billions of dollars. In the last two weeks, Mr. Clinton has announced he will add billions more for counterterrorism and national missile defense (NMD) in the fiscal 2000 budget he sends next month to Congress. Lawmakers are expected to embrace his plans, and perhaps inject more money than he seeks.

These efforts have come to be known as "homeland defense." It is, asserts Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre, "the defense mission of the next century."

Yet at a time when the US is enjoying global military supremacy and its longest stretch of peacetime economic growth, the preoccupation with self-defense is raising a host of concerns.

Advocates say it is precisely because of its status as the world's sole superpower that the US is facing new "asymmetric" threats. Unable to match conventional US military capabilities, rival nations and terrorists are looking to harness the massive killing potential of chemical and biological weapons, the recipes and components of which are widely available, they say.

Potential foes are also bent on disrupting communications and computer systems critical to US defenses, financial systems, and utility sectors. And "rogue" states like North Korea and Iran are developing missiles that might reach the US mainland, advocates of homeland defense warn.

Clinton faces a delicate balancing act in selling these arguments to a complacent public. "I have tried as hard as I can to create the right frame of mind in America for dealing with this," he said Jan. 22 when

unveiling plans for dealing with terrorism and cybersabotage. "This is not a cause for panic. It is a cause for serious, deliberate, disciplined, long-term concern."

One major question is the extent of the threats facing the US, which saw its first international terrorist strike in 1993 against New York's World Trade Center and hasn't been hit by another nation since Japan sent bomb-bearing balloons across the Pacific.

There is a major disagreement on the need for a limited NMD system. Republicans and many experts are demanding deployment, citing a growing threat of long-range missile attacks by rogue states. But others dispute such forecasts, question the technical feasibility of such a system, and warn that its construction could ignite a new nuclear-arms race with Russia and China.

"Because of the likely response of the nuclear powers, we end up losing more than we gain," says Carl Conetta of the the Cambridge, Mass.-based Commonwealth Institute's Project on Defense Alternatives.

Clinton is taking a politically cautious middle path. He is proposing to boost NMD spending by \$6.6 billion to \$10.5 billion but delay possible deployment until 2005, two years later than planned, to allow more time for resolving technical problems.

There is greater agreement on the need to improve federal, state, and local abilities to detect chemical or biological terrorism and cope with the aftermath. Yet the explosion in programs has raised concerns about coordination and waste. Clinton last year created a new National Security Council post to oversee the efforts, and some officials want the military to create a commander for homeland defense. But the idea dismays some senior officers, who want to focus on war-fighting.

Another issue is whether the government, in striving to protect Americans, limits freedoms. Clinton conceded this concern in his Jan. 22 speech, saying "it is essential that we do not undermine liberty in the name of liberty."

Finally, some experts wonder if homeland defense will go the same way as the cold-war civil-defense programs, which were abandoned with the realization that no amount of money could secure the US from the threat of nuclear annihilation. Even homeland-defense advocates admit determined foes can find ways around defenses.

"You are dealing with such a wide variety of threats ... it's hard to say with any certainty that you've done enough," says Baker Spring, a defense analyst at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington.

Yet many say it is vital for the US to take prudent, cost-effective steps. "Our vulnerability to terrorism involving chemical and biological weapons is extremely high," says Richard Falkenrath of Harvard University, co-author of a book on new terrorist threats.

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