

MST  
5-24-92

# ABM to SDI

## 'Star Wars' may give new life to base in North Dakota

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### Nekoma, N.D.

Two ghost towns stand side by side on the lonely Dakota prairie.

One — Nekoma — is down to fewer than 60 souls, Main St. tumbled down and shuttered. No one really expects that it will ever bounce back.

A mile to the north, the other — the nation's only antiballistic missile (ABM) site — is rusted and abandoned. A looming concrete pyramid that once housed powerful radars now serves as a mausoleum for the Cold War.

But the Safeguard ABM site's prospects are considerably brighter than Nekoma's. A few weeks from now, resurrection of the old site is expected to get underway, transforming it into the first tangible piece of the Pentagon's "Star Wars" antimissile program.

Forget questions about the need for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in a world without the Soviet Union. Forget the fact that the 100 missile interceptors launched from North Dakota couldn't protect most Americans. Forget the fact that the state's three-man congressional delegation isn't pushing for it. And forget the fact that a divided Congress is still debating SDI funding.

After spending \$29 billion on SDI research, federal officials are poised to spend at least another \$27 billion on a ground-based antimissile system, starting at the Nekoma site.

The Defense Department has already solicited bids on two contracts at Nekoma, and Pentagon officials privately assure North Dakotans that it's just a matter of time before the first shovel of dirt is turned.

North Dakotans as far away as Bismarck, sniffing an immense windfall,

SDI continued on page 4A

Continued from page 1A

are positioning themselves to catch some of the cash.

"It's a wonderful situation we could be in — there will be a bazillion little contracts if this is like last time," said Harold (Doc) Blanchard, a chiropractor in Langdon, N.D., 12 miles north of the missile site and the closest city that's still functioning. Blanchard rode the boom (and eventual bust) caused by the Safeguard ABM system as Langdon's mayor and is trying to help shape the coming one.

"I know there's some feeling that maybe there isn't the need for this, and to some degree I agree, but the fact is it's going to be built," Blanchard said. "If it's going to be, it might as well be built here."

### Star Wars' unlikely home

"Here" is Cavalier County, thinly populated cropland midway between Grand Forks, N.D., and Winnipeg, Manitoba, a seemingly unlikely place for the linchpin of the nation's anti-missile defense. But it's also midway between the nuclear-tipped missiles and bombs at the Air Force bases at Grand Forks and Minot, N.D.

The Nekoma ABM site was the first of 12 planned by the Pentagon, but ended up being the only one built after the 1972 SALT treaty with the Soviets allowed each side to build only one site. The rationale: 100 antiballistic missiles would protect the Air Force's Minuteman rockets from incoming Soviet warheads.

Built at a cost of \$5.7 billion (\$13.5 billion in today's dollars), the Nekoma project rained dollars on northeastern North Dakota: construction jobs, new schools, new streets, new municipal utilities. Town populations doubled, or more.

But it ended in little more than an eye blink. The ABM site was shut down on Feb. 10, 1976 — barely four months after it began operating. Congress had turned against it after Pentagon officials acknowledged that they couldn't hit enough incoming Soviet warheads to justify the cost.

Then, in 1983, along came SDI. Ronald Reagan spun a sweeping vision of an impenetrable technological umbrella in outer space that would shield Americans from nuclear annihilation. Bedeviled by congressional skepticism, technological setbacks and changes of direction, the project has shrunk so much that it's almost a mockery of the original idea.

Although Pentagon officials want to scatter at least seven antimissile sites around the nation, the ABM treaty still in force allows them to build only the Nekoma base. Of the \$27 billion price tag for ground-based defenses, \$12 billion or more would be spent at Nekoma. But because of North Dakota's location, most Americans, living along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, would be outside the range of the Nekoma missile batteries. Nor would ground radar at the base cover more than a fraction of North America.

So, aside from the addition of some technological bells and whistles, the ground-based defense system is little more than a recycling of the 1960s idea of 100 missiles protecting missiles — not people.

### Skepticism abounds

To say there's skepticism about the plan puts it mildly. Although some opponents — traditional arms control and peace groups — are predictable, the coolness toward SDI by North Dakota's congressional delegation has been startling.

Although the project would amount to an immense barrel of pork for the state, both senators have been mum on the issue, and Rep. Byron Dorgan has been downright hostile.

"Making dumb decisions like this and spending billions of dollars we don't have is what's ruining this country," the Democrat said. "It's a system we don't need, and I'm still waiting for an argument that'll convince me otherwise."

That doesn't set well with some people in Cavalier County. "He's going to lose a lot of votes up here," said Steve Andresen, head of the local job development office. "Now that it's going to be built, they all ought to get behind it."

But even in Nekoma, there's skepticism about whether it would work —

and who exactly would be launching the missiles SDI is supposed to shoot down. It's an old question for Tony Liebersbach, Nekoma's longtime mayor, who probably spent more time at the ABM base than any other local civilian.

"I'd go out there and visit the colonel who was running things and argue that it was pretty dumb to spend all that money for 100 missiles when the Russians had thousands," he said. "He never had a good answer until one day he got back from the Pentagon and said it was in case some other country got a missile. Now they're talking about exactly the same thing."

The Soviet Union may have disappeared, but the same can't be said about the rationale for SDI.

It's spelled out in one of the Pentagon's contract solicitations: Nekoma would provide "a layer of strategic ballistic missile defense against accidental and unauthorized Commonwealth of Independent States and limited Third World attacks."

Said Matthew Bunn, associate director of the Arms Control Association, one of SDI's chief critics: "The mad missile commander or Third World wacko originally was the third or fourth rationale for SDI, but now that the old mission has gone away, that's become the main mission. "But there just isn't a big threat out there, making this whole thing a waste of money."

4A

## Support from Congress

Paradoxically, the disappearance of the Soviet Union may have increased SDI's congressional support, said an aide to Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., the project's chief Senate advocate. "You have an actual mission instead of just a jumble of research," said Scott Williams. "This gives us the capability of limited protection against a real possible threat."

That argument was persuasive enough last year that Congress gave its strongest endorsement to the ground-based defense system, while undercutting the administration's space-based ideas. That process has continued this year, with SDI devouring \$4.15 billion, the biggest item in the defense budget. An even larger sum — \$4.3 billion — is working its way through Congress in next year's Pentagon budget.

No formal announcement has been made that Nekoma will become the first Star Wars site, but that appears to be almost beside the point.

Two contract solicitations released this month by the Pentagon specify North Dakota as the site. The Army's manager of the ground-based system last month told a group of North Dakotans, "We're going to do it and the leading candidate is Grand Forks," referring to the city that is the Pentagon's reference point for Nekoma. He dangled the possibility of as many as 2,100 jobs. And a spokeswoman for the Army's Strategic Defense Command said, "We're going ahead as if it's going to happen."



Star Tribune map

It's contingent upon Congress, but it's most likely going to."

Operating on that assumption, some work has already started. A Missouri firm is repairing underground water leaks, and a few workers are at the site every day. A Minot construction firm has won a \$2 million contract to maintain and repair the buildings and grounds.

In Nekoma, people fume about being left in the dark. "They won't tell us a thing," Liebersbach said. "You'd think they'd give us a chance to prepare for this."

He was riding around the site's perimeter one day last week. "It's a shame how fussy they were when they built it and just let it all go to scrap," he said. "You look at that missile field over there at night and all the white posts sticking up make it look just like a cemetery."

The city, which didn't have a paved Main St. until the ABM project came to town, now can't afford to patch the street. "If it comes, maybe we'll get a new street out of it again," Liebersbach said. "It looks like they got a bunch of money to spend so they're going to, no matter what."



Photo by Jackie Lorentz — Grand Forks Herald

4A

Security guard Jim Novacek of Edmore, N.D., watched over a gate at the ABM site in Nekoma, N.D. This photo was taken last fall.