The Trident: Our Pre-Sunk Supercarrier

by Frank Packard

When Jimmy Carter, the former Navy man, vetoed the defense authorization bill last August, he said it was because the bill contained $2 billion for a nuclear-powered supercarrier the Navy didn't need. The ship was too big, said Carter, too expensive, too vulnerable. In this era of nuclear deterrent and nuclear strategy, aircraft carriers are no longer an important component of the national defense, he added.

But unchallenged by the administration were funds in the same bill for another Navy program that deserves the same kind of scrutiny and debate the aircraft carrier is receiving. That is the Trident submarine program.

Unlike the supercarrier, the Trident is not a one-ship proposition. As envisioned by the Navy, a minimum of 14 Tridents will be built to replace the current Polaris/Poseidon nuclear-powered fleet. While the original cost estimates in the early 1970s were $800 million for each ship, today, with cost overruns by its shipbuilder, General Dynamics, inflation, and construction delays, the Navy estimates the Trident will cost taxpayers $1.2 billion. And that is just for the hull, the shell. When you add the 24 nuclear missiles—at $10 million apiece—the Tridents will carry, as well as sophisticated components and weaponry which will be added, *each* Trident is going to cost about as much as the supercarrier. With the first ship still at least a year and a half away from completion, the Navy has committed itself to spending $30 billion on Trident submarines.

Besides its enormous cost, the Trident is similar to the supercarrier in another way: its size. The Trident is not just a big ship—it is huge, massive, a "whale of a weapons system," says *Fortune* magazine. At 560 feet long, it is five feet longer than the Washington Monument and 178 feet longer than any submarine to come before it. It displaces 18,700 tons, compared to the Polaris' displacement of 8,000 tons. It has an immense 90,000-horsepower nuclear reactor as its engine. So large is this ship that when fully equipped, there are doubts as to whether it will be able to maneuver from the shipyard in Connecticut where it is being built through the river it must travel to get out to sea.

Where the Trident is different from the aircraft carrier is in America's indisputable need for submarines. Submarines are the Navy's most important ship. Equipped with nuclear missiles, they give the United States the equivalent of small, roving nuclear missile bases at sea—underwater, movable, difficult to detect. Combined with land-based nuclear missiles and the Air Force's bomber force, submarines help form the so-called "Triad" defense—our primary nuclear deterrent strategy since the late 1950s.

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Our present fleet, the Polaris/Poseidon submarines of the 1960s and 1970s are considered invulnerable to detection—indeed it is not too much to say they have been the most important component of the Triad.

On the basis of its potential value to America's defense strategy, then, the Trident, for all its expense, might still make sense in ways the supercarrier clearly cannot. But this, sadly, is not the case, for the Trident is far from the ideal submarine we ought to be building for the future. Rather than being an advance over the Polaris/Poseidon nuclear fleet, the Trident program is a step backwards. Despite its awesome gadgetry, its sophistication, its powerful nuclear clout, the Trident submarine will be *more* vulnerable to detection or attack from potential enemies than the Polaris/Poseidon fleet ever was.

There are at least five good reasons why the Trident submarines shouldn't be built.

- Their size. It is ironic that so many in Congress, particularly those on the armed services committees are so willing to back large ships on the theory that the bigger a ship is, the better it is. In the case of the Trident, precisely the opposite is true. The larger a submarine, the easier it is to detect. It takes up more space in the water, and, more importantly, its large reflecting surface makes it more susceptible to detection by sonar.
- Their speed. The Trident's 90,000-horsepower nuclear reactor makes it the fastest missile-equipped submarine ever built—capable of traveling at up to 25 knots. But this, as it turns out, is no advantage at all. Fast submarines, in fact, are easier to detect than slower ones. Evading sonar (a submarine can hear sonar before the sonar detects the submarine) is complicated by the fact that the faster a submarine travels the more noise it makes, and hence, the more vulnerable it becomes to detection.

Nor is the added speed any benefit if the purpose is to avoid Russian attack submarines. Those submarines, nuclear powered and considerably smaller than a Trident, go at least 10 knots faster than the Trident.

- Their location. The base planned for the Trident submarines is in Bangor, Washington at Puget Sound; the decision to put it there appears to have been a political one, designed to reward Senator Henry Jackson for a vote that was critical to the program's survival. But Bangor is far from an ideal location for a submarine base. It is not very close to the open sea. To get from the base to the ocean, it would have to travel a 100-mile-long corridor that never widens more than nine navigable miles. Current American submarine tracking methods include following the paths of missile subs from the moment they leave port; our enemies, we can surmise, do the same—and sending our submarines through this narrow channel, we are making it much easier to find and track the Trident fleet.

This kind of naval planning is enough to give one visions of disaster should the Trident fleet ever be under attack—visions of an enemy blocking off the Sound, crippling the base and the trapped ships. And these are not visions quickly allayed by the Navy. While justifying the selection of Bangor, one admiral conceded, "No one is saying that we have an answer to all things with mines, or all things with ships and torpedoes." Remember Pearl Harbor?

- Their numbers. With the Trident program, the Navy is led further into the direction of fewer and larger ships. The Trident fleet is planned at about 14 submarines—no one in the Navy dares propose more because they cost so much—yet the ships will be replacing a current fleet of 41 Polaris/Poseidon submarines. That means, at its simplest, that America is going to have 27 fewer nuclear missile submarines in the water at the point at which the current fleet is retired. In defending the President's carrier decision, Thomas B. Ross, an official at the Defense Department, wrote in a letter to *The Wall Street Journal*, "No matter how

capable a ship may be and no matter how expensive, it can only be in one place at a time." Ross could just as well have been talking about the Trident.

The numbers game is an important factor in nuclear deterrence strategy. It is generally considered desirable to have as many nuclear missiles in as many different locations as possible, because it lessens the chances that an enemy, even one as rich in nuclear weapons as the Soviets, could knock out all our retaliatory force in a first-strike attack. The fear that we are always capable of striking back under any circumstances, say nuclear strategists, is what makes for good deterrence. The theory is that fewer eggs in a very large number of baskets is the best defense strategy. The Polaris/Poseidon fleet, with 41 ships, gave us that kind of approach. The Trident, with its 14 ships, obviously does not. It is clearly easier to find and track 14 ships than it is to get at 41. Although the Trident will carry 24 missiles, and although each missile will have eight separate nuclear warheads, the Trident fleet will still fall far short of the combined firepower of the current fleet by about 200 missiles. Trident proponents argue that its missiles will have a much longer range—4,000 compared to the present 2,500 miles—which is true, but what they fail to add is that that same kind of missile range could be installed in the smaller submarines as well. The point is, you don't need a Trident to carry the Trident's missiles.

The Trident makes even less sense in the light of current SALT negotiations. After the first SALT agreement expired, the U.S. and Russia agreed in the interim to limit the number of missile launch tubes in submarines to 710 per side. But they also agreed there would be *no* limit on the number of submarines. It is expected that SALT II will continue that arrangement. Why, then, aren't we spreading those 710 launch tubes around, why aren't we making it impossible for an enemy to cripple all of our submarine missiles? A large fleet of smaller submarines like

the Polaris/Poseidon would give the U.S. that capability—and it is interesting to note that that is precisely the direction in which the Russian submarine fleet has headed.

• Their delays. The first Trident submarine had an original due date of 1978. That ship is still being built and is now not expected to be ready until early 1980, barring any more unforeseen problems at General Dynamics. The problems have been caused mostly by the Navy—it gave the contract to General Dynamics before any engineering blueprints existed, and it grossly underestimated the cost and difficulty of building the submarine. The combined troubles, however, have put our submarine capacity in some jeopardy. The current fleet, built between 1959 and 1967, had a life expectancy of 20 years, and although it has turned out to be more durable than expected, the Trident delays almost certainly mean that much of the Polaris/Poseidon fleet will have been retired before a full complement of Trident submarines is ready to replace it.

A Lemon of a Submarine

The Trident program, in a word, has been a blunder, a disastrous effort by the Navy on just about any count—cost, strategic effectiveness, timing. It has put us in a bind. Yet throughout the 1970s the Navy has pushed ahead with it, lobbying for it in Congress, ignoring its detractors on Capitol Hill and even in the Defense Department. How did we get saddled with this lemon of a submarine, a ship we don't need and shouldn't build?

It began in 1966, with the Strat X project, formed to decide on the next strategic weapon. They decided on a new generation of submarines. The Polaris/Poseidon fleet had turned out to be extraordinarily good. It had been built at a reasonable cost (the 41 ships cost a total of just under $20 billion) and was flexible enough so that the ships could be retrofitted as better, more powerful missiles were developed. But the submarines' life was limited, so the Strat X project came up with a proposal to replace the fleet, centered around the concept of reasonably sized submarines—a little smaller than the Polaris/Poseidon fleet, in fact. They would carry 24 missiles with improved range and firepower. Out of this project came several specific assignments, one to Admiral Levering Smith to develop the new missiles, and one to Admiral Hyman Rickover to develop the nuclear reactor.

Smith's missile concept was the model of efficiency—its range was 1,500 miles greater than the present capability and it could be retrofitted into the Polaris/Poseidon fleet if it was ready in time. But Rickover's reactor—the 90,000-horsepower reactor around which the Trident has been built—was a monster. His design was widely criticized; the Defense Science Board and the President's Science Advisory Committee both called it too large, and it was opposed by the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt. But Rickover was a power in the Navy and had considerable clout on Capitol Hill; and by 1971, he was in control—the new submarine was taking on a "Rickover shape," says Zumwalt.

In fact, what was happening—and this may be the most absurd irony of all—was that the Trident program was being developed not for its strategic effectiveness, or for the missiles it would deploy, but to fit around the grotesquely large reactor Rickover wanted to build. Instead of building the engine to fit the ship, the ship would be built to fit the engine.

Rickover's fixation on power and size—of a huge reactor and a massive submarine, defied all logic, but by the early 1970s, the rest of the Navy was enthusiastically backing him. To help ensure the Trident would go forward, the Navy linked the Trident submarine program with the missile program, calling them both Tridents, a wholly unnecessary move as far as the missile was concerned, since the Trident missiles could be used on smaller

submarines—including the Poseidon. The result was to slow development on the missile (in order not to get too far ahead of the submarine development) and to allow the Navy to divert money from the missiles to the submarine, since they were part of the same program. (Indeed, when the two proposals were first brought to Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard in 1971, he approved the missile but vetoed the submarine.) Because both projects were named "Trident," the Navy could—and did—legally direct missile funds to the submarines and has resisted or ignored efforts to separate the two ever since.

About that time, the Nixon administration decided it wanted to use an accelerated Trident program as a "bargaining chip" for the first SALT negotiations. At this point, the submarine still had no engineering blueprints, nor did anyone have any clear idea what it would cost, but the administration and the Navy insisted it was necessary for SALT. In 1971 Congress had appropriated $105 million for the Trident. In 1972, after Defense Secretary Melvin Laird had made his "bargaining chip" plea, this ship that no one knew anything about was funded to the tune of $1 billion. (Doesn't the sheer insanity of spending all these billions for bargaining chips trouble you a bit?)

Through it all was the feeling from the Navy and its congressional boosters that the right way to proceed was to push forward with the biggest submarine we could build. It is an attitude endemic to the Navy and some of the more gung-ho members of the armed services committees, and it says a lot about why we are now stuck with the Trident.

Writing in *The Washington Post* shortly after the aircraft carrier veto, Daniel S. Greenberg said that ships like the supercarrier and the Trident were "plush recreational vehicles" that serve little function other than as "incomparable stage[s] for the ego lifting" of admirals. It is a common enough desire; we all want the biggest and the best, and we all to some extent fall into the trap of believing that biggest *is* best. Admirals don't want to command "little" submarines, compacts that might be a more intelligent choice than the Trident.

In Congress, that same kind of attitude can be found from the likes of Rep. Charles Bennett, chairman of the House seapower subcommittee, who sums up his feelings about the Navy budget this way: "I'm inclined to give the Navy everything it asks for this year and just add something to it."

And it is the kind of attitude that put us into the defense mess we're now in. We got a bargaining chip instead of a submarine; an admiral's delight instead of a strategic weapon; a monstrous, expensive, poorly planned, and often delayed $2-billion mistake instead of a replacement for an efficient, workable submarine fleet.

Now the Defense Department is going to add to the cost of the Trident mistake by spending $30 billion for its "shell game" strategy. The idea is to build empty holes that look like missile silos, to make it more difficult for the Russians to target all of our land-based missiles. That is $30 billion we would not have to spend if we had a large submarine fleet of small ships, a fleet scattered enough and big enough to make the shell game strategy unnecessary.

The Navy, which got us into this mess, is finally realizing that it ought to be thinking of a way to get us out of it. With the Trident costs still escalating and with Congress starting to get worried, the Navy recently announced the formation of a panel to review the Trident program to see if there are better, and cheaper, alternatives. There are, of course, as the people working on the Strat X project realized in 1966. But it is now 12 years later, the Polaris/Poseidon fleet is going to wear down soon, the Trident isn't ready to take over, no new alternative submarines have been thought about, and the question now becomes: is 1978 too late to reverse the Trident mistake? ■

Tidbits and Outrages

How Soon They Forget

Two political scientists recently surveyed the staffs of United States senators to find out if those who had been undergraduate political science majors are more likely than those less fortunate 1) to recognize the applications of political science to their Senate jobs, 2) to have greater professional and social contact with political scientists, and 3) to read political science books and journals. Their findings: "The data collected failed to confirm any of these hypotheses."

Plus an Exciting New Column, Self-ish

Conde Nast's new magazine, *Self* promises "fascinating how-to articles" on Self-care, Self-assertion, Self-expression, Self-awareness, Self-expansion, and Self-esteem.

Quote of the Month Dept.

Buster Daniels, the assessor of Newton County, Texas, as reported in *The Texas Observer*: "The timber companies own 85 per cent of the land in this county. They tell *us* what they're going to pay."

The High Cost of Saving Tax Money

The Federal Disaster Assistance Administration sent out a press release recently that began "Tax dollars can be saved at all levels of government." It was sent by Western Union Mailgram. The *Wisconsin State Journal* inquired and found out that the release had been sent to 200 papers at a cost of $17.45 each. All to say, "Tax dollars can be saved."

What's the Score?

Harper's Bazaar offers the inspirational counsel to its readers in the current issue: "Money is the scoreboard in the game of working and the person who accumulates the most dollar-points is considered a valuable star."

Flag Day Follies

June 14 is Flag Day, and while that may not mean much to most of us, it is a very special day for Rep. Ted Risenhoover. A recent editorial in *The Washington Post* explained why:

"The Risenhoover campaign committee has bought television time to air . . . a half-hour version of the official Air Force film of this year's Flag Day observance in the House. As edited by Rep. Risenhoover at his own expense (a modest $650, compared with the $5,000-or-so the Air Force spent to produce the film), this epic documentary includes an inspirational address by evangelist Oral Roberts, whose headquarters is in Tulsa. [Risenhoover is from Oklahoma.] But the dramatic climax is a reading of "I Am an American" by the chairman of the House Flag Day Committee backed up by the Air Force's Singing Sergeants and band. Do we have to tell you who is this year's chairman of the House Flag Day Committee?"

After wondering how it came to pass that the Air Force had filmed this minor House event, the *Post* continued:

"When you poke into that, you learn that it was not a one-time favor to a two-term congressman. Instead, it has become routine over the years for the services to supply a band and a camera crew for the House's annual Flag Day show. The Air Force simply got the call this year.

"Does this mean there's an intense nationwide demand for—and use of—Flag Day movies as inspirational programs?... Well, not exactly. The film is quietly handed over to the Flag Day chairman, and his office distributes it. Mr. Risenhoover thinks highly of this service; he shared last year's movie—in which he was shown making a patriotic speech—with some 200 groups in his district. Apparently no one else used it."