



THE PUBLIC REPORT



THE MX & ARMS CONTROL

AN INTERVIEW WITH CONGRESSMAN LES AUCOIN

BY KATRIN BRIDGET SNOW

The MX missile passed the Congress last month by six votes, a tight margin, considering that the President had the timing of the vote, the power of his office, enough popular support and a few political plums to offer wavering members of Congress, all on his side. The House approved funding for twenty-one MX missiles, one of the most vulnerable weapons systems in the United States nuclear defense system, and one that as a first strike missile is an offensive weapon, not a defensive one.

The crucial argument for the President was the now familiar notion of a bargaining chip; the idea that America would lose credibility at the START negotiations if Congress did not back the President's defense plans. That argument made it possible not only to vote for the MX missile and appear to be committed to arms control; it made it essential to vote for the MX to prove one's commitment to arms control.

The argument, though perhaps more effectively used by Reagan than by Nixon or Carter, is not new. SALT I, which banned longrange antiballistic missile defense and capped construction of intercontinental ballistic missiles and submarine-launched ballistic missiles, put no restraint on any kind of MIRVs. MIRVs (multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicles — or more warheads in one missile) were to form the base in the next stage of the ULSL nuclear arsenal. SALT II limited MIRVs but made no mention of the cruise missile. Cruise technology was new in the 1970s, but since then is becoming the basis of America's European nuclear defense system. The interesting difference between the MIRVs, the cruise and MX is that the former two had and do have practical application in strategic nuclear planning. The MX is bulky, cumbersome, and vulnerable in its silos, and as such is an odd bargaining chip for the President to use. Some analysts have suggested that the MX is merely a necessary step towards the Star Wars defense which would be essential to protect the vulnerable MX.

Oregon Congressman Les AuCoin has been a vocal opponent of the nuclear arms race, and particularly of the MX missile, and in the following interview he addresses these issues.

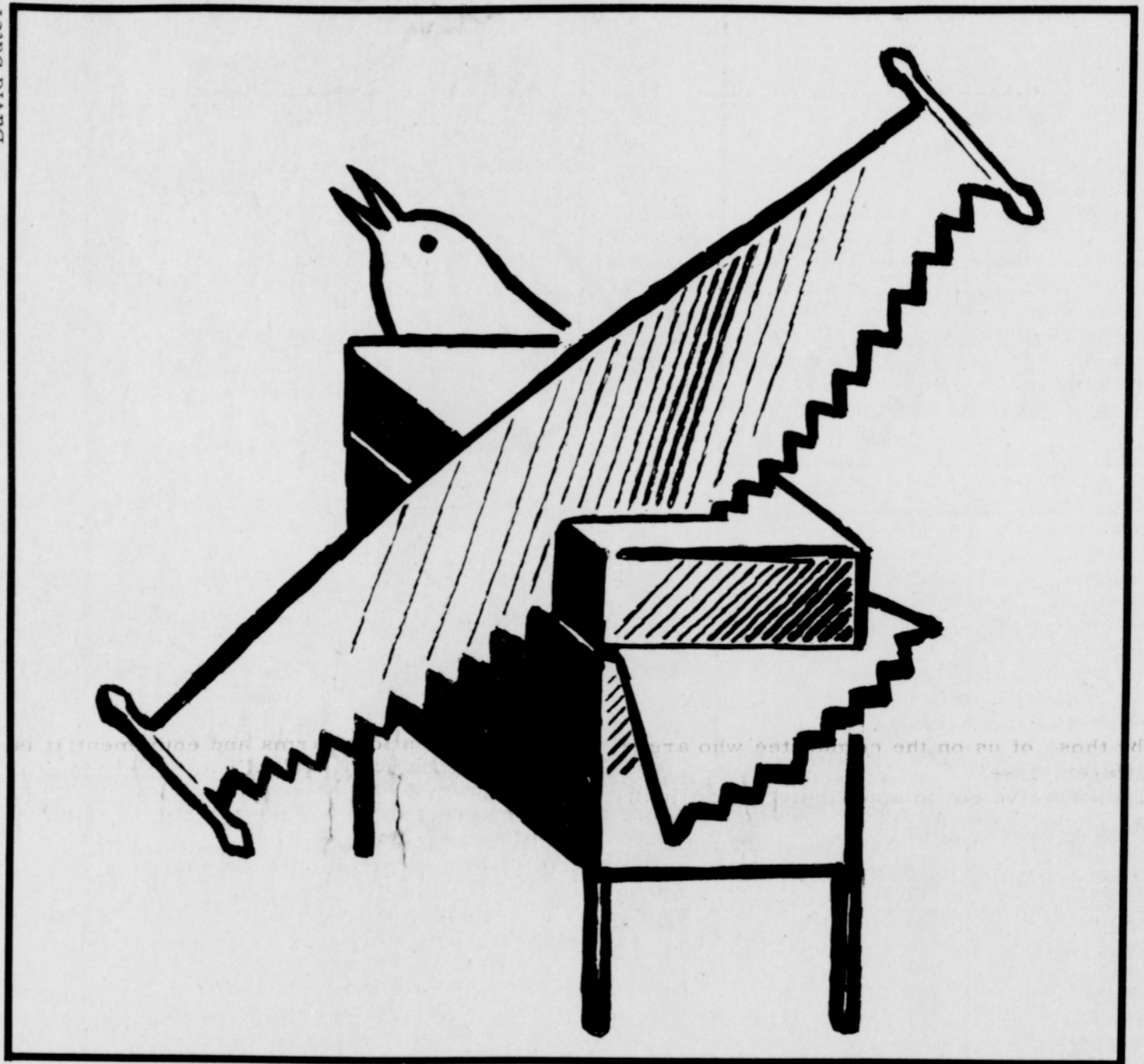
AuCoin says President Reagan is a crafty political strategist, using the arms talks at Geneva as a bargaining chip on Congress for the weapons systems he wants. The President's concept is not based on any rules of diplomacy, AuCoin said, but is instead based on a deep-seated hatred of the Soviet Union and a desire to force it to his will.

The interview began with Congressman AuCoin commenting on why the President was able to use the bargaining chip argument so successfully.

AUCOIN: The President is a crafty political strategist and he has been underestimated throughout his career. We should stop doing that now because I think he has shown once again that he can pull rabbits out of his hat. The use of the bargaining chip argument is what sold Congress on the MX missile. We would have clearly won in the House of Representatives, we would have stopped the MX had the President not scripted and planned the choreography around arms control bargaining chip arguments.

Look at what he did: He was in control of the timing of the vote. The law that fenced off these funds said that within so many days after the President submits a report to Congress there will be a vote in Congress. First of all, from the standpoint of timing, it was a masterstroke to time the vote by releasing the report so that the vote would occur two weeks after our arms control negotiators sat down and started talking with the Russians in Geneva. That set the stage for him to say, "Our negotiators are just beginning to talk. You can't embarrass me as President of the United States and show the Soviets that our government is confused on arms control

David Suter



by taking the MX away. That shows a divided government. That shows weakness." Those arguments are compelling to some members of Congress. Not to me. Not to anyone who knows how totally useless the MX is. Not to anyone who knows how terribly dangerous the MX is. But to a critical number of marginally undecided voters who haven't really thought these questions through, it is the kind of argument that really sways them. It became an easy way to go along. The President said, "I need this as a bargaining chip." These members went along and did not read the fine print. The fine print was that he also said, "I want the MX regardless of whether we get a treaty." In other words, any treaty he seeks will make it possible to build the MX, so he does not want to negotiate it away.

KBS: In other words, it is not really a bargaining chip. He has no intention of giving in at all on it.

AUCOIN: Caspar Weinberger has said that the MX must be built and should be built

whether we have a treaty or not, and any treaty that we have should make it possible to build weapons like the MX.

KBS: So if Caspar Weinberger can say that, and presumably the Soviet government would know that we are saying that, why would it be an effective bargaining chip?

AUCOIN: It is not an effective bargaining chip. Let's be honest about what this is. We have the whole question of George Orwell's "1984" — Doublespeak. Doublethink. Love is hate. War is peace — being played out when it comes to the question of the MX and arms control. Under this administration the arms race is arms control. No longer are arms control talks to reduce weapons. They are bargaining chips on Congress to produce the weapons systems that this administration wants to build. Now if that is not George Orwell, it is the closest I want to see.

KBS: Did very many members of Congress realize that the MX was going to be built no matter what? Was that a common perception or understanding at the time?

AUCOIN: Some members were stampeded by a President who is very popular and very politically powerful. He said in personal phone calls to them: "Congressman Jones, this is Ronald Reagan. I just want to tell you we're down to a very few votes. I'm asking you as a personal favor to me to give me a vote, as the President, for the MX." For Congressman Jones, who may not have a lot of candlepower upstairs on strategic nuclear questions, who might be from a district that could go either way on a partisan basis in an election, and whose district Ronald Reagan carried by seventy percent in the last election — when that kind of President makes that kind of request, the Congressman can be snowed. He can be dazzled. He might even believe it. He might even believe that the President needs this weapons system. Others know better. There is another category of member I have talked with who knows a lot better than that but nevertheless voted for the President because they



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