

# Red, white & blue yonder

**G**rey Ghost Spooks Reds. That's how a headline writer could sum up the current Soviet reaction to the new B-2 Stealth bomber. Moscow is most unhappy.

On Nov. 22, the U.S. Air Force rolled out its top secret B-2. After years of speculation, the sleek, contoured bomber turned out to be a flying wing without a tail. Its engines are buried deep in the wings. Exhausts are probably blended with cold air to mask infrared signature. The aircraft body is almost all plastic composite materials that have low radar reflection.

A grey, radar-absorbent skin makes the bat-like aircraft even harder to detect. Low radar visibility and a powerful offensive electronic suite won't make the B-2 truly invisible, but they will cut down its radar cross-section to about that of an average goose.

Not surprisingly, the massive Soviet air defence system, which consumes 18% of the total defence budget, is not designed to spot birds.

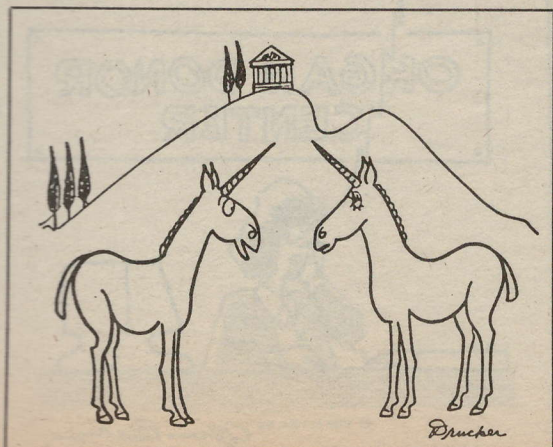
According to military experts, the B-2 will be able to slip unobserved through holes in the radar screen that surrounds the Soviet Union. So will the newly revealed Stealth fighter, the F-117.

To cope with Stealth bombers, strike fighters and forthcoming cruise missiles means that the Soviets will have to invest about \$60 billion in their air defence system—money they don't have. Radar dishes need to be made larger, signal processing faster and the air defence system's data links must be speeded up and enhanced. For a nation which can't make its phones work, the intensive computer and electronic upgrades needed to counter the Stealth threat will be a big and costly headache.

Fortunately for the Soviets, the Americans can't afford to build too many of the monstrously expensive Stealth aircraft. Some estimates put the cost of the B-2 bomber at between \$500 and \$750 million each. About 52 F-117s and perhaps 60 to 80 B-2s will likely be deployed in squadron service. But even these small numbers pose a deadly threat to the Soviets.

The prime mission of the B-2 is to evade Soviet

## Punch



"Oh, you're very real to me."

## ERIC MARGOLIS



air defences and drop special earth-penetrating nuclear weapons on the deep, underground bunkers where the Soviet civilian and military leadership will take cover. A secondary mission is to go after rail and land-mobile Soviet missiles. What worries the Soviets so much—and I think with good reason—is that the B-2 can be used for a surprise, decapitating attack on the Soviet leadership and command structure. Taking off at night, the B-2 could fly over key targets undetected and paralyze the Soviet Union in a bolt from the blue.

Expect Soviet strategic arms negotiators to raise this issue shortly. They will claim that the B-2 gives the U.S. a true surprise, first-strike capability that is dangerous and destabilizing. Don't be surprised to see the Soviets refuse to scrap their big SS-18 blockbuster missiles until the U.S. does something about Stealth.

The something, if the U.S. Air Force has its way, will be to make more Stealth aircraft. The B-2 puts the USAF back in the business of manned penetrator missions into Soviet air space—which makes the pilots happy. This will take some heat off the trouble-plagued B-1 bomber which was supposed to drop bombs down the Kremlin's chimneys but pretty obviously can't.

As for the vampire-shaped F-117 (maybe we should call it the Bela Lugosi), the Air Force wants this nasty plane to sneak over key Soviet command centres and air defence headquarters and bomb them back to the Stone Age.

The small F-117 fits into a C-5A jet transport. Fly one into Copenhagen or eastern Turkey at night, roll it out and the F-117 might be able to reach Moscow—and certainly Leningrad or Kiev.

So, in a sense, the USAF is almost back to those happy days of the 1950s and early '60s when its high-flying U-2s (the Stealth predecessor) soared over Russian airspace, too high for Soviet fighters to reach. Or when the world's fastest aircraft, the SR-71 Blackbird, used to dash over corners of the Soviet Union, turning Soviet radar emissions into scrambled eggs. Once again, the mighty U.S. Air Force is going to be able to moon the angry Soviets from safely overhead.

It was quite a trick for Mikhail Gorbachev to force a big military cut on his grumpy marshals just when the Stealth aircraft were coming into service. Now the marshals will clamor for their own super-expensive Stealth technology (already well advanced on Soviet submarines) for aircraft and tanks.

Keeping up with the Americans' Gen. Jones is going to cost a bundle. Maybe the Soviets could just pretend they have Stealth, since you can't see it anyway.