

# Stealth mission already accomplished

What is invisible to the Russians, an eyesore to its critics, costs \$380 million a copy and looks like it should be the Batplane?

That's easy. The new B-2 Stealth bomber which flew this week for the first time.

Now, here's a harder question. What exactly is the \$380 million warplane supposed to do?

The answer is the deepest of the many mysteries that surround the black, manta-shaped aircraft. According to the U.S. Air Force, the Stealth is designed to fly unobserved through Russia's dense air-defence system and to go after the new mobile and highly dangerous Soviet SS-24 and SS-25 ICBMs.

"Hogwash!" roar packs of leftist critics, most of whom have lately become instant military experts. The B-2, they say, is the granddaddy of all Pentagon boondoggles and waste, a provocation to the peace-loving Soviets, a macabre scheme by old bomber generals who want to refight World War II — and totally unnecessary. Cruise missiles, only \$3 million per round, or ICBMs could do the job faster and far, far cheaper.

True, all true. But also irrelevant. The B-2 has two quite different missions, both secret. The Air Force cannot speak of either because the U.S. public is still too naive to face the answers. So the Air Force has to lie and dodge heavy flak from its critics.

"Spend 'em back into the Stone Age" is mission No. 1 for the Stealth. The Soviets, hypersensitive about the chastity of their skies, have erected a massive air defence system, a sort of anti-aircraft Maginot Line. Soviet air defence forces have over 1,300 interceptors, 7,000 radars, 9,300 anti-aircraft missile launchers and 371,000 men. Air defence consumes 17% of the total

Stealth is nothing less than the decapitation of the Soviet leadership in time of crisis. The Soviets can pretty well determine if cruise or ballistic missiles are being fired against the USSR. But they most likely would not be able to see incoming B-2s, particularly at night. In the event of a crisis, or if the U.S. learned the Soviets were planning a surprise nuclear attack, the Stealth could fly into the USSR unobserved and drop a stick of nuclear bombs right down the Kremlin's chimney before anyone in Moscow knew what was happening.

Other B-2s, using nuclear bombs with earth-penetrating warheads, could take out the underground bunkers sheltering the rest of the Soviet high command and political leadership. In a few minutes, the USSR would be headless and thus helpless since the whole country is run from Moscow.

Both missions make a great deal of sense. But the poor Air Force can't discuss either, for obvious reasons. It doesn't matter that the Soviets can decapitate the U.S. by firing low-trajectory missiles at Washington from subs lying off the U.S. coast. The U.S. dare not even hint that it might ever contemplate a pre-emptive first strike against the USSR. So the Air Force will be left to wriggle and explain why a plane that looks like it was built by Robin costs so much money.

No matter how good the B-2, \$380 million apiece is a pretty steep bill, especially when defence budgets are being slashed and Gorbachev is crooning lullabies. The B-2's cost is horrifying Congress. But it's also terrifying Soviet military planners and those who run the nation's Maginot Line in the sky. Stealth and Star Wars may be vastly expensive but they have also driven the Soviets to the arms negotiation table.



Eric  
**MARGOLIS**  
in New York

Soviet defence budget.

The B-2, which existing Soviet radars will have great difficulty seeing, can literally fly right through the Soviet defences. Counteracting Stealth means spending billions of rubles on new radars, computers, missile guidance and research. For every \$1 the U.S. spends on the B-2, the Soviets will have to spend at least \$3 on countermeasures. This is rather like a poker game where the player with the most cash in reserve wins. Russia, this week, is out of potatoes and soap. Recent audits have shown that the Kremlin is broke and running a growing deficit. Where will the Russians find more billions of rubles to update their air defence system and, at the same time, spend other billions to counteract the U.S. Star Wars program? Nowhere. Pentagon generals know this and are rubbing their hands with glee. The Soviets have lost the military-economic war of attrition. The West has outspent them — that's why Mikhail Gorbachev has decided to give up past efforts to impose Soviet influence through military power.

What's more, money spent on air defence can't be used to build offensive systems like subs, aircraft or ships. So much for mission one.

The second, and even more secret assignment for