

# Radar debate excluding vital issues

## EXPERT FILE

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U.S. President George Bush's recent visit to Europe highlighted the controversy over the proposed construction of U.S. anti-missile bases in the Czech Republic and Poland. For months, the media have been full of discussion about the pros and cons of hosting a radar station in Brdy, Central Bohemia. "It's not about one radar [base]; it's a basic question about our national security. This is something we have to discuss with our public," Lubomir Zaorálek, Social Democrat (ČSSD) shadow minister for foreign affairs, recently told daily *Chicago Tribune*.

As an American observer of Czech society, it seems to me that the national leadership has so far failed the Czech people in the discussion of this important and complex topic. Base supporters have ignored the social and ecological risks associated with hosting foreign troops and equipment, while offering only vague assurances of benefits to the country. What is needed is clear, factual information so the country can make an informed decision.

Until now, three main pro-base arguments have been advanced. Some political leaders assert that the base will help nearby local economies. Others say close alignment with the U.S. is strategically valuable. Still others have used emotional arguments, affirming that because then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan won the Cold War and freed Czechoslovakia from Soviet influence, Czechs today should repay America by allowing the base construction.

While such pro-American sentiments are understandable, a feeling of indebtedness to Reagan is hardly a sufficient basis for sound foreign policy, and the economic and security arguments have not been backed by data.

It is not clear that hosting an anti-missile base would make the Czech Republic more secure. Rather than promoting security, the plan has already produced instability in relations between the U.S., Europe and Russia, and may provoke a new Cold War between the U.S., Russia and China. If the base were constructed, the local impact would be to make the Czech facility a target for attack.

Some have reasonably asked that if the base is truly intended to defend Europe, why not pursue the plan within a NATO framework?

It is also not obvious that locals would profit financially from construction and maintenance of a U.S. base. Though they tout the economic benefits, politicians provide no numbers to show that a base would help Central Bohemia. The combined Polish-Czech anti-missile system is projected to cost the U.S. government about \$3.5 billion (Kč 74.6 billion/€ 2.6 billion) by 2013. How much of this money will find its way into the pockets of local residents? If indeed there is evidence that a base would help local economies, then Czech government leaders should publicize the estimates for an open discussion.

Due to the lack of convincing pro-base arguments, Czechs are skeptical that the plan is a good idea. A poll released at the end of May by research organization Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (CVVM) indicated that 61 percent of Czechs reject the proposed base, while only 30 percent support it. Residents of municipalities surrounding the projected site have rejected the base in multiple referendums. Those against the base are not generally anti-American. Instead, they question whether their country should actively support certain American policies.

### Havel's promise

There are good historical reasons for Czechs to doubt that a foreign military presence will benefit their country. They remember that when the Russians left after 1989, President Václav Havel promised never again would foreign soldiers be stationed in their land.

Not only have facts been missing from the current debate, but so has consideration of the potential social and ecological costs of hosting a foreign military installation.

In his book "The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic," retired professor and former CIA consultant Chalmers Johnson documents the social problems that exist around U.S. military bases worldwide. The sad fact is that prostitution, drugs and other crime follow American troops wherever they are stationed, and U.S. troops can often commit offenses against locals with virtual impunity.

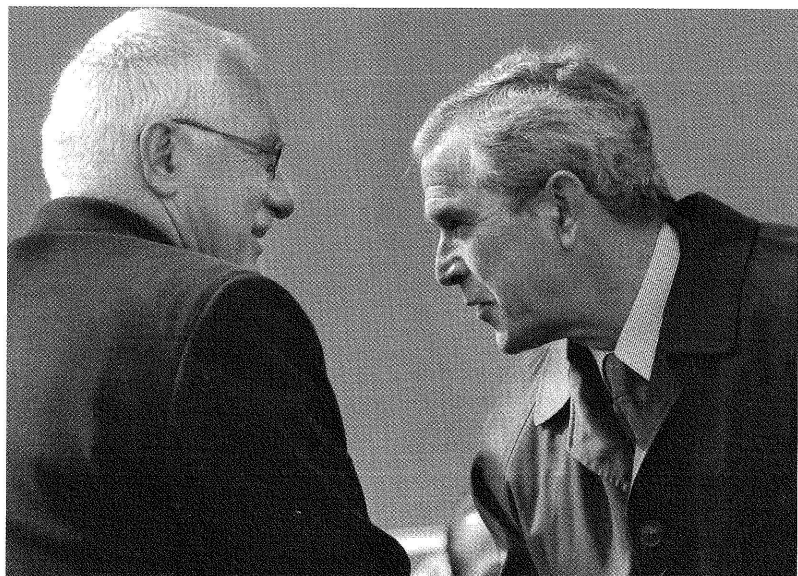
Consider the 1988 cable car tragedy in Cavalese, Italy, when U.S. Marine aviators flew a jet too low, cutting the cable carrying vacation-

ing skiers. The car fell 80 meters and all 20 passengers were killed. Italian authorities wanted to prosecute the Marines in a local court, but found that NATO treaties required the personnel to be tried by a U.S. military court. The pilots were taken to the U.S. and were acquitted of responsibility for the accident.

There have been numerous cases of U.S. troops raping young women on the Japanese island of Okinawa. Occasionally they are surrendered to Japanese authorities for trial, but most often they are swiftly removed to the U.S. to face military inquiries. In another example, in

crimes committed by U.S. troops, but the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) imposed by the U.S. military on host countries will inevitably make U.S. troops immune from criminal prosecution in the Czech Republic. Czechs should read the fine print of the agreement to understand what they are getting into.

Czechs must not only be wary of their American negotiating partners, but also should keep a close eye on their own officials. Bribery allegedly played a role in the Czech Army's recent decision to purchase Gripen jet fighters, which should prompt the public to be vigilant against corrup-



Presidents Klaus and Bush should exercise candor with Czech and American citizens.

2002 American troops killed two young girls in South Korea with their vehicle and were found not guilty by an American military court.

It is important also to consider the probable ecological problems that would be caused by the proposed base in Central Bohemia. Just like the Soviet occupiers of Czechoslovakia, the American military has a history of polluting the environment in and around its bases. For instance, a military airport is located in my hometown in the U.S. So far, taxpayers have had to pay \$67 million to clean up toxic incinerator ash and deal with potential groundwater contamination on the base, and the long-term costs are expected to run into the hundreds of millions of dollars.

### Read the fine print

Czechs should expect nothing different from the U.S. military if a radar base is established in Central Bohemia. Not only may NATO treaties limit local jurisdiction over

tion in the radar base decision-making process. The history of corruption in Czech military deal making underscores the risk to Czech democracy itself from the stationing of American military hardware and personnel in the country.

The big issue that faces Czech citizens today is who would benefit from the base? What is the quid pro quo being bargained between America and the Czech Republic? So far, these questions have not been answered honestly by anyone in power.

One may well wonder whether a deal is being made to waive visa entry requirements for Czechs traveling to the U.S. in exchange for the base. Will the Czechs ask the Americans to pay a high rent for use of the land? Czech and American citizens alike deserve to know what is being negotiated. ■

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