

Cold War relics coming down

Some think
radar systems
should not be
dismantled

By RYAN LENZ
• The Associated Press •

MOSCOW, Maine — It's a dinosaur of the Cold War: a three-mile-long radar system spread across hundreds of rural acres and designed to detect Soviet bombers screaming across the Atlantic.

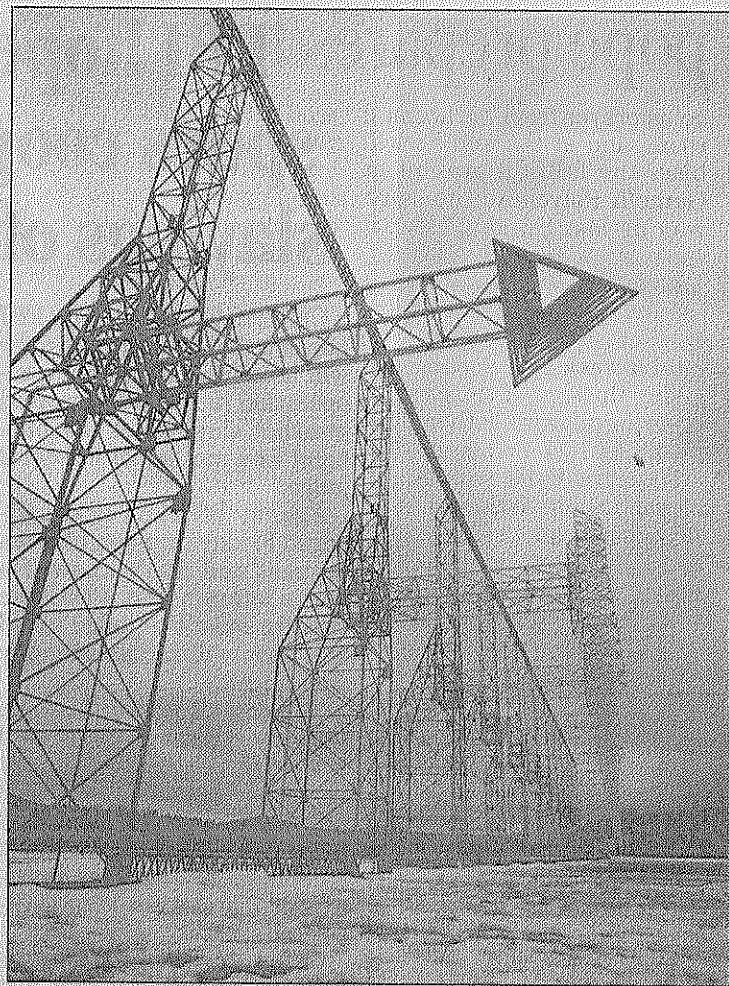
When operational, it could monitor a massive swath of ocean and warn of a threat 1,700 miles away — leaving plenty of time to scramble U.S. military jets in response.

But like warhead silos and other relics of the post-World War II arms race, the military is scrapping the wire-and-steel monolith and offering the expanse of land to private industry.

"The world changed," said Steve Hinds, manager of the OTH-B radar program at Air Combat Command, which oversees U.S. fighter and bomber wings. "This will not be used for what it was intended. Ever."

The backscatter radar in Maine, and a similar system reaching out into the Pacific from Oregon, could bounce a beam off the ionosphere, which sent a scattered detection signal back to the Earth's surface. The systems were so sensitive, they could note changes in ocean currents.

The radar in Maine, nestled in the woods in a place that bears little resemblance to the Russian capital for which the nearby town was named, cost \$1.5 billion to develop. It was operational for a mere year in the early 1990s, before being



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A section of the over-the-horizon radar is seen in this Feb. 9 file photo at the nearly 1,200-acre Air Force facility in Moscow, Maine. After more than a decade in storage, the Air Force has begun to disassemble the radar, which during the year of operation in the early 1990s, was able to see thousands of miles off coastal waters.

mothballed in favor of more advanced Navy technology.

The Air Force maintained the ability to restart the radars until late last year, when dismantling of both got under way.

David Winkler, a historian with the Naval Service Museum, studied the radars for a report to the Defense Department in the late 1990s on the legacy of the Cold War.

"They are out there to deter anybody who has a bad day and decides to launch against us," Winkler said. "But who are we deterring now, al-Qaida?"

While many Cold War military installations have closed in the last decade, not everyone shares the assessment that the radar systems are useless.

John Pike, a military expert with globalsecurity.org, said he's puzzled by the decision to dismantle the Backscatter radar at a time when nuclear proliferation remains a concern

and countries such as Iran and North Korea are developing long-range nuclear warheads.

"North Korea's missiles may or may not be able to get to the United States if they were launched from North Korea. But they could if they were launched by tramp steamers 1,000 miles off the coast," he said. "Korean cargo ships, each with one missile and one atomic bomb, would blend into the traffic."

Military officials counter that they're not abandoning defense, just old technology. New radar systems, including a relocatable version of the backscatter radar, have replaced the massive structure.

The Air Force in the months ahead plans to begin shopping the nearly 1,200 acres to industrial clients who could lease the land and benefit from such expansive, unencumbered landscape.