

# Not In My Backyard

**Could Public Opposition to the Deployment of Nike Missile Sites In Densely Populated Urban Areas Have Contributed to the Program's Discontinuation?**

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The story of the Nike missile is one of the lesser-known stories of the Cold war. For more than two decades, the United States Army operated Nike missile program was at the center of the U.S. continental defense system, and played a key role in strategic plans for protecting the country from a Soviet nuclear attack. Despite its importance, the Nike missile has seemingly been relegated to that of a Cold War history footnote. This may be partly due to the fact that its use was never actually needed, as no live Nike missile was ever fired (at least intentionally) outside of testing. For those not old enough to have lived through the early part of the Cold War, as well as those who were, but had not lived near an area designated as a target for Soviet nuclear weapons, the Nike missile was likely a non-issue. But for those who lived in areas protected by Nike missiles, their presence was hardly a secret.

In the early 1950's, Nike missile installations started going up around major cities and military bases all across the United States. However, many of these sites were closed after only a few years of operation. They all were closed and vacated by 1974. General consensus among Cold War historians is that the downfall of the Nike was the result of a combination of three specific things. The first was its lack of effectiveness against the ICBM. The second was its consequent lack of financial support from Congress, who by 1974 was knee deep in budgetary concerns over the war in Vietnam. Its third, and final blow seems to have come with the SALT I talks and the consequent signing of the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty. There is little evidence for one to dispute the legitimacy of each of these claims. But when one looks at the locations of these missiles and their proximity to densely populated urban areas, another question comes to mind. How did the American public, who in some cases lived and played right next door, respond to having these in many cases nuclear warhead equipped

**Above right:** The "oozlefinch", the unofficial mascot of the Air Defense Artillery branch of the United States Army. A featherless bird, the oozlefinch flies backwards at supersonic speeds and takes out enemy aircraft. Image courtesy of the U.S. Army ADA School (online).

**Right:** Front to back: The Nike Ajax, Nike Hercules, and Nike Zeus EX missiles. The Nike Zeus EX, also known as the Spartan missile was one of several other experimental versions of the Nike following the introduction of the Nike Hercules. Designed to take out Soviet ICBMs, not just aircraft, the Spartan was never put into deployment by the U.S. Army. Image courtesy of the U.S. Army Redstone Arsenal Historical Information (online).

Nike missiles, located essentially in their own city's "backyard"?

This essay will argue that however minor, public concern over the various safety hazards posed by the Nike missile sites, and the Army's seizure of both private and public property, was a persistent issue the government faced throughout the Nike missile career, and therefore must have been taken into consideration when the program was discontinued entirely (within the United States) in the early to mid 1970's.

## The Winged Goddess of Victory

Developed before the rise of the ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile), and world leaders' acceptance of the M.A.D. doctrine in the 1960's, the Nike missile program was remnant of a time early in the Cold War when the United States was focused first and foremost on its ability to *defend* itself from a nuclear attack, not just being able to *retaliate*

