

Shrines on the Information Highway

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Nuclear warheads were once deployed at Lorton prison.

Okay, maybe not in the prison. But from 1958 until the early 1970s, the Army stationed nuclear-armed Nike Hercules surface-to-air missiles on the 3,200 acre grounds of the Lorton Correctional Complex in Fairfax County. The warhead bunkers, located at the launch site at Hooes and Furnace roads, are an official secret.

Internet detractors say the Web is a repository of dangerous information, but the nuclear deployments at Lorton are not discussed anywhere online. This despite dozens of Internet shrines to the Nike missile that now serve as a modern-day mess hall, where former crewmen jabber away, sharing experiences and swapping stories.

More than 15,000 such shrines to military units and individual weapons exist on the Internet. The sites reveal fascinating details, many still guarded by an over-classified military. And the phenomena of the Internet shrine reveals some tensions between history and remembrance.

Ack, Track, Smack

Christopher Bright, a doctoral candidate in history at George Washington University, is an expert on the now-obscure Nike Hercules missile. As a historian with a capital "H," Bright displays an academic skepticism about the Internet as a source for history. "Thirty-five percent of the stuff is inaccurate or distorted" on the Nike Web sites, he says.

Bright's attitude about the Web isn't entirely dismissive, and it might in fact be posturing — "professors would shudder at the thought that I rely on the Internet," he says — yet his research bread and butter remains the traditional instruments of academic history: paper archives and official documents. Having started his academic career before the emergence of the Web, he admits the ease with which his work is accelerated by the Internet.

Given Bright's unqualified search for the impeccably reliable, his favorite Nike missile Web site is the U.S. Army's official history site for missiles at [Redstone Arsenal](#). The site, I agree, is one of the finest government-run online archives in existence, with one of the largest photo and video repositories available on any military Web site.

A Devoted Following

That Redstone Web site, according to a historian at the base, was all done voluntarily — no government computers, software or time — must be a story in itself. But Redstone shares a certain cultural similarity to the mere enthusiast home pages. And that is that the energy and love devoted to telling the story of the Nike and other Army missiles at Redstone is the very signature of an Internet shrine, whether it is official or garden variety, whether the subject matter is a missile or a mushroom.

Three private Nike Web sites — [Ed Thelen's Nike Missile Web Site](#), Donald E. Bender's [Nike Missiles](#)

& Missile Sites and Rolf's NIKE Pages in Germany — exemplify the military shrine, and are particularly strong in keeping the Nike legacy alive. A fourth site the Nike Ajax and Hercules Ordnance Support Units home page is devoted to the “special weapons” technicians and guards who toiled on the Nike missile during the Cold War, keeping custody of the warheads and the codes to fire them.

No self-respecting historian, or journalist, can any longer ignore the Internet resources embodied in these shrines. The writing of history and the shrine are not incompatible.

The Nuclear Umbrella

From 1958 to 1979, according to Chris Bright, small numbers of nuclear warheads were dispersed to 134 Nike missile sites in 26 states, ringing 29 major cities and 11 military bases. The Internet tells bits and pieces of this story.

It is a history worth preserving. Bright, who grew up in Fairfax County not far from the Lorton site, can rattle off the 25 missile sites that ringed the Washington-Baltimore area. Deployment of the missile, he says, was the largest defensive building program in the continental United States since the Civil war; the building of the launcher themselves constituted the largest elevator order let in the United States at the time.

Site W-64 at Lorton was the first site to open — the largest in the Washington area — and was for a while the national visiting site, frequented by VIPs (the crown prince of Iraq once paid a visit) and open to the public on Sundays. That is, until the nuclear warheads arrived.

The Nike Legacy

The entire history of the program, Bright says, is “typical of the holy smokes we have to do something right now” attitude of the Cold War.

Bright has written in historical journals about the development of the Washington area sites. Almost every site has a story behind it regarding the “handling” of local sensitivities in construction and use of land. In other words, not-in-my-back-yard is hardly some postmodern symbol of citizen selfishness and lack of martial spirit. It was alive and well even during the darkest days of the Cold War.

What is more, the entire Nike enterprise, based upon a Soviet bomber gap in intelligence knowledge, still has relevance as we debate national missile defense and electronic defense of the homeland today.

The 90-year-old Lorton prison is scheduled to close by December 2001, and the fate of the land, and the Nike artifacts, is still up in the air. The only restored Nike missile launch site is located in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, in a former military installation known as Fort Barry in San Francisco. Site W-64 is unlikely to follow as a memorial or a real shrine. That duty will have to be assumed on the Web.