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GOP's response to Patriot gaffe could have Clinton taking cover

By Ralph Z. Hallow; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Bill Clinton's weapons mix-up has armed the Bush campaign with the equivalent of a Patriot missile that, aimed right, can explode the Arkansas governor's claim that he is qualified to be commander in chief, analysts say.

"The Bush campaign should jump on the Clinton statement and base a campaign commercial on it," said GOP communications whiz Brad O'Leary.

"I don't think there's much risk for the Republican ticket, given what the press has done to Dan Quayle," he said. "You have on the one hand a vice president who can't spell 'Patriot' and on the other a presidential candidate who doesn't know what it is."

Mr. O'Leary, like a number of other GOP campaign advisers, compared the Clinton gaffe to the one President Ford made in 1976 when he said Poland was not under Soviet control.

Mr. Ford, in a debate with Jimmy Carter, said "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" and "I don't believe the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union."

Democratic media consultant Ray Strother said the Ford statement was devastating to his campaign. "The polls showed afterward that the American people thought the Poland statement revealed that Ford wasn't in charge and didn't have a grasp of what was going on."

Republicans believe Mr. Clinton's off-the-cuff statement Tuesday will further damage his credibility. He said that Patriot missiles "go through doors or down chimneys."

"It's exploitable if the Bush campaign does it right," said former Ross Perot pollster Frank Luntz. "All Bush has to do is to plant doubt in voters' minds that Bill Clinton may not know his missiles. The time to harvest that doubt, however, is in his national-defense debate with Clinton."

Whether the Bush forces have the savvy is another matter, say GOP strategists who have been critical of the president's campaign strategy. They note the confusion over what to say about family values and how to package and sell Mr. Bush's economic ideas.

Most strategists agree that defense is not Mr. Clinton's strong suit. He once said that he was qualified to be the nation's commander in chief because he heads Arkansas' National Guard.

Mr. Strother said he expects the Bush campaign to turn the Clinton gaffe "into an ad, because I don't think it's something the Bush campaign can resist, given the bad shape it's in."

"What Clinton said is absolutely shocking," said GOP media consultant Floyd Brown. "While most Americans sat on the edge of their chairs watching our boys in action, he must have totally tuned out the event."

"This shows Clinton as a man who wants to run for president and command our defenses but doesn't even understand

what our weaponry is," Mr. O'Leary said. In making his off-the-cuff comment on Patriot missiles, Mr. Clinton apparently was thinking of laser-guided bombs. Campaign spokeswoman Dee Dee Myers yesterday called the error "just a slip of the tongue."

Most campaign experts in both parties say that voters are willing to forgive the occasional twisted tongue.

President Bush has racked up his own share of eye-crossing locutions and linguistic bobbles. On Sept. 7, 1988, as a candidate in the last election, he began a speech by hailing the day as the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. And Vice President Dan Quayle's periodic faux pas have given TV comedians ample material.