PROJECT PLUTO VOUGHT SLAM

In 1957, the U.S. Air Force officially launched, Project Pluto. The goal was to create a nuclear-powered ramjet Supersonic Low-Altitude Missile (SLAM) that could function as the ultimate deterrent to Soviet aggression.

In the event of an impending conflict, Pluto would be launched most likely from a hardened underground site via three solid rocket boosters, These would accelerate the missile to ramjet speed, then be jettisoned. Once at cruising altitude (35,000 feet) Pluto could circle at its Fail Safe point for an extended period until either brought home or released on its bombing run.

Traveling at Mach 3, Pluto would drop to virtual tree-top level, tearing ground structures to shreds with its sonic boom, all the while spraying a lethal stream of highly radioactive exhaust in its wake. But that was just the pre-show. Pluto's real punch was to be its 14 and 26 thermonuclear warheads which could be launched one at a time through a system similar to the launch tubes on a Polaris/Poseidon submarine. (Launching the warheads upward instead of simply dropping them would give Pluto enough time to escape the blast of its own weapons.)

In 1961, progress on Pluto had progressed far enough that a nuclear-powered ramjet engine dubbed Tory-IIA could be successfully tested at a special facility constructed in Jackass Flats, Nevada. Tests continued there until 1964. Ling-Temco-Vought (LTV) was awarded the contract to build the actual airframe.

Just one problem remained: How do you test a nuclear-powered doomsday weapon? This was one problem Pluto's engineers were unable to solve. That coupled with the development of dependable ICBMs and the ecological challenges Pluto presented caused this ambitious program to be canceled in 1967.