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Future of SDI, The;The Reagan Legacy and the Strategic Defense Initiative: Articles and Essays

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THE FUTURE OF SDI

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INTRODUCTION

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which I oppose.

As in so many other things, the public has grasped the obvious, and that is why the negative phrase "Star Wars" has stuck (much to President Ronald Reagan's chagrin): neither the Soviet Union nor the United States can afford to let the other side get the upper hand militarily. If our lasers go up into space, theirs will soon follow. It will truly be Star Wars on a terrible scale.

In 1983, President Reagan invited the American people to glimpse the future. The President's vision of a total defense was enthralling and hopeful. He bid us to walk with him straight into a brave new world of futuristic space shields, a world where Soviet nuclear-tipped missiles were made "impotent and obsolete."

He asked for a down payment of twenty-six billion dollars over a five year period. After that money had been spent, his successors and the Congresses of the 1990's would sift through the facts and make an informed decision.

In theory, there is nothing objectionable to spending scarce resources on new ways to improve our nation's security. We routinely do this. The Constitution says that Congress shall provide for the common defense, and that has come to include a hefty annual sum for defense research and development.

But not every idea that comes down the pike makes sense politically or militarily, even if there is a glimmer of technical optimism. And SDI just does not make sense as presently constituted.

I support a research program on antimissile technologies. Almost everyone in Congress does. But a limited, prudent, research-only program consistent with the terms of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 is one thing; SDI is a crash program to build and deploy a questionable system of dubious merit. As Attorney General Edwin Meese has said, the Reagan Administration wants to "lock in" future Presidents and congressmen to its own particular SDI program.

The U.S.—Soviet nuclear standoff is cause for great concern, but SDI is the wrong way to go. The program is more likely to fuel the arms race than control it. For the forseeable future, political solutions involving negotiations will build a safer world—not orbiting space shields armed with lasers and particle beams.

Each side has acquired approximately 25,000 nuclear warheads. We are locked in a stalemate. That stalemate is sometimes called "mutual assured destruction," or MAD. Both sides are deterred from striking the other because

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devastating retaliation would follow. This is the basic condition of life in the nuclear age.

For over forty years the world has lived with the terrible destructive power of nuclear weaponry. Our best scientists and engineers, our military commanders and civilian strategists, tell us that nuclear weapons are of a completely different nature than conventional weapons.

Unfortunately, too many people continue to think of nuclear weapons as if they were only slightly different from the bombs we dropped during World War II—more powerful, perhaps, but really not that different. Too many national security officials believe that nuclear warfare is practical. A few even believe that victory is possible.

But Hiroshima was destroyed by a single nuclear bomb with a yield of just thirteen kilotons (the blast of which is equal to 13,000 tons of TNT). An entire city wiped off the face of the earth by a single blast. Today's weapons are many times as destructive, and there are 50,000 such weapons around the globe. Nuclear weapons, especially today's multi-megaton devices, are so potent that a mere handful can effectively destroy the northern hemisphere in a matter of hours.

EXPLODING SOME SDI MYTHS

The Invincibility Myth

Let me take on some of the myths about SDI.

The first is that we can, in the words of former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, erect a "thoroughly reliable defense."

It does not matter how good our technology becomes. There has never been a defense that has proven foolproof or leakproof, and there is no prospect that such a defense can be erected. SDI does not contemplate stopping all methods of delivering nuclear weapons—cruise missiles, for example.

Any defense can be directly or indirectly attacked, or it can be overcome. A wall can be breached, torn down or circumvented. Once that happens, all the computer simulations and wargaming will go right out the window, because the system will break down.

We are told that Star Wars might stop ninety or ninety-five percent of incoming warheads. But the nerve-center holding any strategic defense together—the advanced computers—can never be realistically tested. The only true test can be nuclear war itself, because testing individual parts of the defense will not tell how it will function as a whole under immense stress and direct attack. The French Maginot Line, a wonderful piece of advanced technology for its day, was out-flanked. And, just like the Maginot Line, SDI is not being "perfectly" designed. SDI will not protect us against cruise missiles, manned bombers, ballistic missiles that never leave the earth's atmosphere, and "suitcase" bombs. These weapons of mass destruction will continue to threaten civilization regardless of SDI.

The most likely result of SDI is a greater number of Soviet offensive nuclear weapons. Soviet leaders want to be sure that they can overwhelm or evade any U.S. defense. Given the substantial current lag in Soviet ballistic missile defense technology, it seems clear that the Soviet military would achieve this goal by building up and diversifying their current strategic arsenal. We would probably

do the same if the Soviet Union deployed their own Star Wars system.

The Affordability Myth

Another myth is that a space defense can be built "on the cheap." One leading conservative group, the Marshall Institute, estimates total costs at $120 billion; still others give lower estimates. The reality is that our best independent estimates put the cost at well over one trillion dollars, and perhaps over two trillion, because any SDI system will have to be constantly maintained and upgraded.

Now, two trillion dollars is a mind-boggling sum. The most expensive construction project to date in the history of humanity has been the U.S. interstate highway system, where initial construction costs totaled $123 billion over a number of years. Two trillion dollars is approximately sixteen times the cost of the interstate highway system. The reality is that initial SDI costs will be at least eight times as high as the interstate highway system. The Congressional Research Service has estimated that a Star Wars deployment beginning in the years 1997-2000 could cost as much as 1 trillion for *launch costs alone.*

In fiscal year 1988 the SDI program will spend $3.9 billion. The Reagan Administration wants more than one billion dollars additionally, for a total of five billion dollars, for fiscal year 1989. Most experts believe a well-run basic research effort can be had for far less money. In short, we are spending too much on SDI research. I am deeply troubled about our nation's sense of priorities. The current budget level for SDI research is approximately three times as much as the federal government spends on cancer research.

And how would a space defense be financed? There are only three ways to do it. Number one, you substantially increase taxes. Number two, you cut other defense and our social programs substantially. Or number three, run up astronomical deficits, far greater than any we have seen to date, and send the bills to our children and grandchildren.

These are not responsible choices. Would it not be far cheaper to negotiate arms reductions? Every missile and warhead we remove through verifiable arms control is a missile and warhead that cannot be used against us. The cost of sending a negotiating team to Geneva is incomparably less than the cost of building, deploying, and maintaining a defense in space.

The Arms Control Myth

The third myth is that SDI will help bring about arms reductions. SDI proponents argue that it is, or will become, a bargaining chip in arms talks. But unless you cash in your bargaining chip, it provides you no negotiating leverage. President Reagan and his followers are serious about deploying a space defense. They have gone well beyond research. This unduly complicates our negotiations with the Soviet Union.

I have proposed a much cheaper alternative to SDI, and a much safer one: a ballistic missile flight test ban. It is fully verifiable. A flight test ban will remove Soviet confidence in planning a first strike.

Think of a marksman. If he or she is somehow prevented from going down to the range for target practice, odds are very great that that person will do

poorly at the meet. He or she will hit something, but it will not be the bulls-eye.

A flight test ban will have the same effect. The United States and the Soviet Union will still deter one another—we know, after forty years of flight testing, that we can hit the other country and destroy major cities and installations—but neither they nor we will have the pinpoint accuracy to take out the other side's nuclear missiles. We will both take a step back from the hair-trigger, the "use them or lose them" problem, and the arms race will slow down as a result.

CONCLUSION

Time and again, the United States has turned to technological advances to provide its citizens a measure of security. Each time the Soviet Union has caught up, and each time we go back to the labs for a bigger and better solution. Paul Warnke, President Carter's SALT II negotiator, captured the essence of the arms race when he wrote that we have become "apes on a treadmill."

SDI will not get us off that treadmill. No technological solution, by itself, could possibly do so. If we want to build a safer future, if we truly wish to see nuclear weapons greatly reduced and gradually eliminated, we have no other choice but to negotiate them away. And at the same time we will create more understanding, and reduce fear—the ultimate cause of the arms race.