

THE POLITICS OF "STAR WARS"

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Many regard the nuclear arms race with fatalism: technology out of control. The multibillion dollar Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) represents a different, but equally threatening phenomenon: politics out of control. The driving force for President Ronald Reagan's program was and remains political manipulation—not military necessity, not technological fix.

THE POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SDI

The so-called "Star Wars" initiative was launched by President Reagan in 1983, but the idea of a shield against nuclear attack had been developed three years earlier by the policy research operation of Reagan's 1980 election campaign. At the time, it was turned down for political reasons; the campaign advisors feared it would undercut Reagan's demand for newer and more powerful nuclear weapons.¹

Seemingly out of the blue, Reagan revived the old strategic defense idea on March 23, 1983 at the end of a speech praising his other military programs. In a surprising and quite personal message, he called on our scientists to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete" by setting up a space shield to protect the population of the United States from nuclear annihilation.² The new Reagan approach emphasized the moral and ethical objections to "mutual assured destruction"³ the doctrine which some experts say has kept the peace between the superpowers by holding their populations hostage.

It is no coincidence that Reagan's utopian vision was offered at a time when the peace movement at home and abroad was making great headway in destroying the delusion that a nuclear war is survivable. By adopting the rhetoric of the antinuclear movement, Reagan was shamelessly preempting its idealism for political purposes.

A perfect example was the Reagan Administration's use of the nuclear winter theory to attack deterrence and promote the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). Administration leaders co-opted a favorite theme of the peace movement and used it to promote Star Wars even though they had originally attacked nuclear winter as scientifically unsound. On March 7, 1985, Robert C. McFarlane, then Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, said:

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1. M. ANDERSON, *REVOLUTION* 85-87 (1988).

2. See Address of President Reagan to the Nation on Defense and National Security 1 PUB. PAPERS 437 (Mar. 23, 1987). This is often referred to as Reagan's "Star Wars speech."

3. Since the superpowers' mutual development of the hydrogen bomb, the balance between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. has rested on the doctrine of "mutual assured destruction" or MAD. See generally Gray, *The Missile Defense Debate in the Early 1970's*, reprinted in *PROMISE OR PERIL: THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE* at 33 (Z. Brzezinski ed. 1986).

Many of those who oppose SDI advocate reliance on assured destruction in order to keep the peace. Let me point out something about assured destruction. There has been much discussion about nuclear winter recently. While there are many uncertainties, one thing is clear. Nuclear winter is most likely to be caused by the smoke and dust from burning cities that have been attacked by nuclear weapons. Everything in our Administration's strategic weapons policy, including SDI, is designed to move us away from that kind of attack.⁴

STAR WARS CONSTITUENTS

President Reagan offered contradictory policies on Star Wars to satisfy various constituencies. His repeated pledge to share a space-based antimissile system with the Soviet Union plays well in the era of General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's immense popularity in the United States. At the same time the Reagan Administration fought to keep out of Soviet hands the same advanced computers, software, and lasers. They stepped up efforts to keep even high-technology goods sold in American retail stores or exported to allied nations from making their way to the Soviet bloc.⁵ This highly publicized effort pleases the "peace through strength" constituency.

Star Wars is immensely pleasing to the religious and secular fundamentalists of the far right who were on a political roll in the United States during the early days of the program. They share a vigorous repugnance to dealing with the Kremlin, proclaiming that all past efforts at nuclear arms control have been futile and that most have benefitted the Soviet Union and weakened the United States. Such attacks ignore the manifest mutual benefits of the Partial Test Ban Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force Treaty, as well as the limits negotiated by SALT I and SALT II. Star Wars caters to the obsessive urge to build up the U.S. nuclear arsenal and to impede efforts to halt the arms spiral through diplomacy. If the Russians cannot be trusted, a plan to knock down their missiles is better than dealing with them.

THE IMPERATIVES OF POLITICS

Successful politicians are commonly regarded as unprincipled because they cater to public opinion. In fact, their political imperative is based on two firmly held principles: get in power and stay in power. For them, a careful reading of public opinion is an absolute necessity and supersedes ideology. Of the imperatives driving the nuclear arms race, the economic, the technological, the strategic, and the eschatological always seem to dominate on the surface. The media is preoccupied with weapons technology and superpower strategizing, but the primary imperative is domestic politics: who will control the nation. Politics is paramount. Everything else is secondary, even national security.

In the 1960 elections, John F. Kennedy reheated the Cold War by outflanking superhawk Richard Nixon, charging that the United States was in mortal danger

4. McFarlane, *Strategic Defense Initiative*, reprinted in U.S. DEP'T OF STATE, BUREAU OF PUB. AFF., CURRENT POLICY (No. 670) at 3 (1985).

5. Many in the Reagan Administration were very hesitant to share SDI-related technology, as proposed by President Reagan. See, e.g., the following op-ed columns by William Safire: N.Y. Times, Nov. 14, 1985, at A35, col. 1 and Nov. 21, 1985, at A35, col. 1.

because the Eisenhower-Nixon Administration had allowed a missile gap to form. Historical evidence shows that Kennedy knew the charges to be false.⁶

In 1962, Kennedy went to the brink of nuclear war over missiles in Cuba. The United States had hundreds of nuclear missiles capable of reaching the Soviet Union; the Soviets had less than ten that could reach the United States. Kennedy refused a *quid pro quo* that could have defused the crisis earlier because he felt he had to prove to the American public that he could stand up to Nikita Khrushchev. The 1964 election was looming and Senators Kenneth Keating and Barry Goldwater and the ubiquitous Nixon were attacking Kennedy daily for failing to protect the nation.⁷

In 1976, candidate Jimmy Carter ran on a platform that called for zero nuclear weapons. However, in his 1980 campaign he tried to outdo his hardliner opponent, Ronald Reagan, by issuing Presidential Directive 59, a nuclear war fighting doctrine that poisoned and destabilized superpower relations. Carter did this because he had seen public opinion data calling for a tougher America.⁸

Public opinion also had its part in SDI's origins. To an American electorate that overwhelmingly supported the nuclear freeze, Star Wars was intended to show that Reagan's goal, like theirs, was to end the arms race. This was even as he built a multitude of new offensive nuclear weapons. And in fact, at least as far as public opinion goes, Star Wars has worked.

Abraham Lincoln said, "What I want is to get done what the people desire to have done, and the question for me is how to find that out exactly." Nancy Reagan is said to have asked over and over, "What is the pulse of the country?" The White House takes polls every week on nuclear arms control and other issues. In so doing, it is applying its virtually unlimited political resources to follow a developing trend in American politics. What is this trend? Simply this: discover what the voters feel through public opinion polls, then give it back to them in the most simplified form on television.

According to Rick Reed, a former staff member with the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, polling in 1983 indicated that public support for a nuclear freeze and fear of nuclear war could be vulnerable points for the President in the 1984 elections. In response, Reagan effectively defused the threat by meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and launching SDI, while simultaneously waging an anti-Soviet advertising campaign.

All of the public opinion polls taken during the 1984 campaign gave Reagan positive ratings for his stated Star Wars goals. These polls revealed that Americans were inclined to support Star Wars if described as a defensive system. However,

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6. F. KAPLAN, *THE WIZARDS OF ARMAGEDDON* 155-61. See also Hilsman, *How the Missile Gap Closed Up*, N.Y. Times, Sept. 26, 1987, at A26, col. 1 (letter to the editor). Roger Hilsman, who was State Department director of intelligence and research during the Kennedy Administration, acknowledged that Kennedy, as a U.S. Senator, knew from classified material to which he had senatorial access that the U.S. led the U.S.S.R. in missiles. Kennedy later claimed that his campaign warnings were not disingenuous, but stemmed from his worry that in the future the U.S. might lose its edge. *Id.*
 7. R. KENNEDY, *THIRTEEN DAYS: A MEMOIR OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS* 3 (1971).
 8. Burt, *Carter Said to Back a Plan for Limiting Any Nuclear War*, N.Y. Times, Aug. 6, 1980, at A1, col. 1 (detailing the Carter Administration's decision to shift priority of U.S. nuclear targets in the U.S.S.R. from civilian to military).

the idea of putting nuclear weapons in space made them, and continues to make them, extremely nervous.

People tend to believe that proposed systems can be made workable, but they are very concerned about the cost. The American public prefers an assured defense to mutually assured destruction. But, even more than these, it prefers an agreement that would ban nuclear weapons from space.⁹ As popular as Star Wars may be with Americans, the INF Treaty, an agreement to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons, attracts greater support.¹⁰

SDI: Where Reagan and Disney Meet

Politics and entertainment have always been tightly interwoven in the United States, a nation that denies its conflicts of ideology and class. The popular zeal for political entertainment has been readily apparent to European visitors since Alexis de Tocqueville described the unique role politics played in American social life in the 1830's. Oratory and whisky were prime ingredients in the political process from the cities of the east coast to the western frontier. Lincoln's brilliant address at Gettysburg was received with hardly a murmur; it was too short, not entertaining enough. The great enthusiasm was reserved for Edward Everett, who thundered for hours from the same podium. Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative was born in an American popular culture dominated by space adventure movies like *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. In SDI, fantasy and policy merged.

Star Wars, both the Reagan program and the movie, played an important role in diverting the American public from the very difficult domestic problems facing the Reagan Administration: the trade imbalance, which has caused the pressure for protectionism; the desperate plight of American farms, which ended Republican dominance of the United States Senate; the enormous federal deficit, now totally out of control; and the attacks on the Social Security system, which have alienated many voters.

Beyond these issues, Star Wars seeks to capitalize on the growing sense of American nationalism. Americans harbor a growing resentment that America and its ideals of liberty are underappreciated around the world. Americans fear that their once omnipotent republic is losing its grip on world events. Alas, the rest of the world is catching up all too quickly. The notion of "Fortress America"

9. Schneider, *Public Prefers Arms Negotiations to Star Wars*, 17 NAT'L J. 2008 (1985). See also, J. MARTILA & T. KILEY, A NATIONAL STUDY OF ATTITUDES TOWARD NUCLEAR WAR AND ARMS CONTROL (1985).

10. A March 1985 poll by the Roper Organization produced the following results to this question: "Do you think that the United States should or should not build a space-based defense system?"

Should54%
Should Not.....34%

An October 1987 survey conducted by John Marttila and Tom Kiley produced the following results:

"Do you approve or disapprove of the agreement to sign a treaty to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear missiles based in Europe and in the Soviet Union.?"

Approve.....72%
Disapprove20%
Don't Know 8%

appeals to a nation that, in addition to cheering its own national anthem, selects as its top favorite a song called "Born in the U.S.A."¹¹

Americans have not yet come to terms with their Cold War vulnerability to foreign attack. Since 1814, no foreign military force has set foot on American soil. Now, however, in the shadow of Hiroshima, we can no longer rely on our Atlantic and Pacific security blankets. American public opinion gyrates around the nation's shocking new vulnerability. Every presidential administration since the Second World War has reflected the ambivalence of public opinion as to defense in a nuclear age. Every president since Eisenhower has both reviled the Soviet Union and negotiated treaties with that rival. And the presidents who were the fiercest anticommunists, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, have negotiated the most important treaties, because they were the best politicians. They understood the schizophrenic nature of American public opinion. They were the best at convincing Americans that they met both their concerns about the Soviets and their concerns about nuclear war.

SDI: Where Science and Sci-Fi Meet

Americans have a belief, almost religious in nature, in the miracle of science. Research has magical properties. In the laboratory, nothing is impossible.¹² Science is the new frontier of American civilization, and it offers unlimited expansion. Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative can be seen as an antiseptic science fiction military adventure. It is not sweaty and dirty like Vietnam was; it is more like a Western in white lab coats.

This quintessentially American mood was well described by David Parnas, an American citizen who teaches at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, and who served as an SDI consultant to the United States Office of Naval Research. Parnas resigned his consultancy on SDI, for which he was being paid one thousand dollars a day, and gave the following reason:

11. Howard, *The Bewildered American Raj*, 270 HARPER'S MAG. 55 (1985). Michael Howard, Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, blames the historical, cultural and geographical isolation of the U.S. for its ignorance of other societies, and maintains that that ignorance underlies the erosion of U.S. influence abroad. This has, in turn, engendered U.S. resentment toward the rest of the world:

[A]mid all th[e] wealth and excellence [of modern America] I [have] perceived a mood of resentment on the part of most Americans, a mood that, I believe, helped bring the Reagan Administration to power. . . . Why, Americans ask, are our achievements not universally recognized and admired? Why does American generosity not evoke more gratitude? Why has American economic power and military strength not brought more influence in the world? Why are small countries in Southeast Asia and the Middle East able to defy the United States, and to gain such widespread support when they do? Why is the United States always in a minority at the United Nations, which it did so much to create and still does so much to sustain? . . . [T]here is a real element of tragedy in America's relation with the wider world—an element that must be understood before anything can be done to remedy the situation.

Id. at 55-56.

12. See generally AM. POL. REP. 14. (July 12, 1985). See also Yankelovich, *Science and the Public Process: Why the Gap Must Close*, 1 ISSUES IN SCIENCE & TECH. 6 (1985). Public opinion expert Daniel Yankelovich sees a "troubling disparity between the scientific sophistication of our culture and its social and political backwardness." *Id.* He describes how science and technology achieved enormous prestige in the years directly following the Second World War, during which new discoveries "stimulate[d] a naive belief in science magic"—an assumption that science and technology could solve any and all problems. . . . [and an] ideology [which] held that science offered a superior path to truth, perhaps even the exclusive path." *Id.* at 9.

Imagine President Reagan woke up one morning and decided he wanted to build a rocket faster than light—the rocket could deliver a nuclear warhead to the Soviet Union before it could even be seen. And so he creates a Faster than Light Initiative. People would make the same arguments in favor of FLI-sponsored research that they are now making for SDI work: we have to research the problem before we can say if it will work; and wouldn't it be fun to try and build one?¹³

A standard popular defense of Star Wars is that it is only a research program, and that we will have plenty of time to decide later on whether to develop and test and deploy the thing. This seems unlikely. Anyone who has studied the ineffectual efforts of Leo Szilard, James Franck and Albert Einstein to prevent the atomic bombing of Hiroshima can have little confidence that a decisive weapon that works will not be deployed. Robert Oppenheimer, William Groves and Harry Truman were determined to complete their mission. And since that time, no major weapons system urged by a president or his chiefs of staff has failed to be deployed.

SDI opponents are sweet-talked: Star Wars is only research, and who can be against research? Yet, earlier phases of the arms race have taught us that research tends to generate vested interests, that a modicum of success inevitably leads to development, that development leads to deployment—and another expensive and dangerous system is fixed in our arsenal. Vested interests of contractors help weapons systems to survive. Corporations currently researching the feasibility of various aspects of SDI are the selfsame ones that will win further contracts if the programs are indeed found to be feasible.¹⁴

THE POLITICAL DANGERS OF CONCILIATION

The history of the Cold War in the United States shows that there is grave political danger in failing to match the Soviets weapon for weapon, regardless of military need. It is important to avoid accusations of being "soft on Communism" or "soft on defense." The safest political course is to build every weapon suggested by the military. To this day, right wing Republicans at all political levels regularly accuse Democrats of unilateral disarmament, even though every weapon system built by the Reagan Administration, except the B-1 bomber, was alive during the Carter Administration.

The Star Wars research program is not new. It is a gathering together of laser, particle beam, and other modern technologies begun by previous administrations. But the public relations and the political effects are new. Even the Democrats are mesmerized and hesitant to attack for fear of being labelled as soft on defense. In the early eighties, Star Wars rhetoric helped push animosity against the Russians to an all-time high. However, the economic burden of the military buildup and the unexpected onset of *glasnost* tipped public opinion in the other direction, and so political pressures demanded that Reagan negotiate a treaty with the Soviets.

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13. Parnas is quoted in Lavin, *Star Struck*, in the Sept.-Oct. 1985 issue of NUCLEAR TIMES.
 14. Sanger, "Star Wars" Industry Rises, N.Y. Times, Nov. 19, 1985, at D1, col. 3 (describes the optimism of the space weapons industry concerning SDI-related contracts, which numbered over 1,500 at this time).

To some degree the survival of the Star Wars project depends upon the Soviet Union. If the Russians keep appearing alarmed by SDI, it will be politically impossible for Congress to vote it down. There may be a Catch-22 here: If the Russians are alarmed, we are on the right track and should continue the buildup. If they are not alarmed, we obviously have not built up enough and so should pour more money into it. Believers in Star Wars are particularly anxious to deploy even a limited version of their system in hopes that it will then become a sacred cow invulnerable to changing administrations.

Star Wars is the logical successor to the discredited civil defense program. Like nuclear civil defense, the illusion that Star Wars would protect the population makes fighting a nuclear war seem more feasible. Similarly, space weapons make nuclear war seem more remote. It gives Americans the psychological strength to endure the anxiety and expense of a frantic nuclear arms race. For the grand solution is always just around the corner.

With the growing public resistance to expansion of the military budget, Reagan has found a way, through Star Wars, to retain the momentum of his armament program. George Ball, Undersecretary of State during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, wrote:

Perhaps the most effective support for Star Wars is now being generated not by ideology but by good free-enterprise greed. Firms in the hypertrophic defense industry, along with their thousands of technicians, are manifesting a deep patriotic enthusiasm for Star Wars. Since they are experienced in lobbying and wield heavy influence with members of Congress who have defense plants in their districts, they are creating formidable momentum for the project. Whether or not it would contribute to the security of the nation, it offers *them* security. Thus, an investment analyst for the industry published a newsletter about the President's space program entitled "Money from Heaven" while another analyst wrote: "For the U.S. aerospace industry the redirection of the strategic arms competition toward defense can hardly come soon enough."¹⁵

SDI is already generating political contributions from contract-hungry companies to key members of Congress. If past experience is any guide, the Pentagon will seek to place SDI-related contracts in all 435 congressional districts.

In addition, the Pentagon is trying to buy up brains by throwing money at the institutions of higher education in the United States. This has met with with some success and has led to some notable failures. Sheldon L. Glashow, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist at Harvard, signed a no-research pledge recently. He said, "I would give Star Wars a "D" because it is a danger to peace, a disinclination to arms control, deleterious to American science, and it is destabilizing, dumb, and damned expensive."¹⁶

Recent governmental studies have echoed the scientific community's criticisms of Star Wars. A study released by the congressional Office of Technology Assessment in June 1988 concluded, "there would be a significant probability

15. Ball, *The War for Star Wars*, N.Y. Rev. of Books, Apr. 11, 1985, at 38, 40.

16. Campbell, *Latest Cause on Campus: Saying No to Star Wars*, N.Y. Times, Sept. 15, 1985, at A52, col. 1 (covers efforts by the United Campuses to Prevent Nuclear War to enroll scientists and engineers in a pledge not to perform SDI-related research). See also Sanger, *Campuses' Role in Arms Debated as "Star Wars" Funds Are Sought*, N.Y. Times, July 22, 1985, at A1, col. 2 and N.Y. Times, Nov. 4, 1985, at A12, col. 1.

that the first and presumably only time the ballistic missile defense system were used in a real war, it would suffer a catastrophic failure."¹⁷

The NATO nations are also understandably nervous about Star Wars. They read the implications as tending to create a "Fortress America" which would leave them outside the U.S. nuclear umbrella and harm prospects for a strategic arms reduction treaty with the Soviet Union. Some dismiss the scheme as an attempt to build a Maginot Line in space. Europeans might also fear that the battlefield use of nuclear arms in Europe becomes more likely as the superpowers develop strong defenses.¹⁸ Though the Pentagon is offering space research contracts to allies of the United States, the allies fear relegation to marginal tasks while SDI's overall direction—and most of its economic benefits—remain with U.S. corporations. As the former director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, Lieutenant General James Abrahamson, has said, since SDI is a weapons project, and largely secret, the allies' participation must necessarily be limited to unclassified work. It can be expected that even this policy will generate stiff resistance from U.S. firms that will wish to keep even less important projects to themselves so as to apply the resulting unclassified research to civilian technology.

CONCLUSION

In the name of nuclear disarmament, the Reagan Administration postured as the conscience of humanity. All the while, it sought to reinforce its political hegemony over the United States and its allies—with a Star Wars program that may work in the political arena, but not in the sky.

Will it succeed? Is Star Wars inevitable?

Not necessarily. Each of the arguments favoring the continuation of the Star Wars program has a built-in countervailing argument. The most powerful is the enormous cost of the program, already funded at over four billion dollars a year. As the cost escalates, there will be political trouble because of worry about the federal deficit and the inevitability of higher taxes. Americans are highly subject to fads; space can be replaced as a prime interest. It is becoming apparent that the great claims made for SDI are merely rhetorical, that the system cannot possibly deliver the security once promised.

All in all, the dominance of political motives behind SDI creates several opportunities for those who oppose Star Wars. In the United States and Western Europe, numerous scientists and activists remain committed to ending the nuclear arms race in space and on the earth. Under our free institutions, they have the responsibility and potential power to reshape public opinion.

The power of the world peace movement has been demonstrated by the softening of pro-SDI rhetoric. In a perverse way, Star Wars represents a political concession by the proponents of nuclear strength. At this point, the movement's

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17. Hochbrueckner & McCloskey, *A Sensible Initiative for the SDI Budget*, 18 *ARMS CONTROL TODAY* 3 (June 1988).
 18. See, e.g., *Howe's UDI from SDI*, *The Times* (London), Mar. 18, 1985, at 13, col. 1 (editorial) (criticizing Sir Geoffrey Howe, the foreign minister of the U.K., for a recent major speech in which he expressed worry that SDI may create a greater likelihood of tactical nuclear war in Europe).

next challenge is to force a serious rethinking of nuclear weapons policy. It can only do this by making that policy subject to the political power of those who advocate the dismantling of global war machines.

