

STRATEGIC DEFENSE: ONE YEAR AFTER REAGAN'S SPEECH

One year ago today, President Reagan announced the boldest national defense initiative in a generation when he proposed development and deployment of defensive systems that could eliminate the awesome threat of nuclear annihilation. Curiously, however, the arms control professionals and freeze boosters, after decrying the doomsday strategy of mutual assured destruction (MAD), suddenly reversed themselves by criticizing the Reagan proposals and by embracing the threat of nuclear destruction as the guarantor of security. Media critics, meanwhile, were quick to deride Reagan's important strategic defense initiative (SDI) as "Star Wars"--as if it were as unrealistic as something conjured up by Walt Disney or George Lucas.

Contrary to these protestations, defense of the U.S. against Soviet missile attack presents a strategically constructive and technologically feasible option to extricate the U.S. and the world from the monumental specter of nuclear devastation. Even a limited defense can strengthen deterrence by heightening uncertainties in the minds of Soviet planners about the potential success of a "first strike" against U.S. military targets. By developing their own defense systems, moreover, the Soviets could feel more secure. U.S. economic assets and population centers can be safeguarded against nuclear destruction, thus breaking the nation's dangerous reliance on the juggernaut of offensive nuclear weapons. In contrast to the holocaust threatened by today's balance of terror, Reagan's SDI offers a moral solution to the uncertainties of the nuclear age.

The technical feasibility of strategic defense has been affirmed by the Fletcher Commission, composed of prominent scientists stretching across the political spectrum. It concluded that emerging technologies offer rich opportunities for providing strong defenses, even against Soviet offensive forces making use of extensive countermeasures. The commission urged expanded research and development designed to establish the technical feasibility of alternative technologies by the end of the decade.

Influenced by the Fletcher findings, the Reagan Administration has requested a very modest increase in funding for research and development of ballistic missile defense technologies. Only \$200 million has been added to last year's FY 1985 projection of \$1.577 billion. Most of this increase is to be funded by consolidating existing programs. As research progresses, the Administration plans funding increases until the end of the decade, when enough data will be available for a decision on whether to produce and deploy the new system. Funds will be divided about equally between research and development of surveillance, target acquisition

and tracking systems (\$10.5 billion) and various defensive kill mechanisms such as kinetic and directed energy systems (\$11.7 billion). The balance will be spent on battle management and support technologies.

Support for strategic defense is not limited to the technology experts. The Future Security Strategy Study, chaired by Fred S. Hoffman, also concluded that limited defenses against ballistic missile attack would bolster deterrence, limit damage should it fail, and could be deployed relatively soon. It also recommended further research into high confidence area defenses. Similar support comes from the American public, appalled that almost nothing has been spent in the past decade on weapons that actually defend the U.S. from attack. There too is growing interest among the European allies.

As modest as the Administration request appears, the SDI faces an uphill battle. Congress is cool to the idea and the Administration so far has failed to make a compelling case for the program. Because SDI does not promise instant results, it is an easy prey for budget cutters. The pressures on Congress by the arms control lobby for negotiations with the Soviets of a ban on anti-satellite weapons, moreover, would proscribe development of some of the most promising defense technologies for SDI.

There has also been a striking lack of enthusiasm in the Pentagon and the military services. Given the past experience with budgetary constraints, both fear the SDI might trigger cancellation or divert resources from existing programs. Pervasive interservice rivalry further dampens support, as each service is trying to protect its interests and secure a role in the organization of research and development for the SDI. This low level of commitment clearly compounds the obstacles involved in the timely implementation of the Administration's program.

Indeed, some existing short-term programs relevant to the SDI already have been cancelled or delayed. But, shortchanging short-term projects to finance long-term research is also ill-advised in the light of recent revelations that the U.S. is trailing the Soviets ten years in ballistic missile technology.

The SDI is in jeopardy of becoming entangled in congressional and bureaucratic politics, stifling endeavors to move swiftly toward a defense that really defends without relying on mutual destruction. Research and development is needed at an accelerated pace. Thus, stronger support and leadership by the Administration is required to provide assured survival in the nuclear age and to ensure that it is being pursued with the urgency it deserves.

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For further information:

Robert Jastrow, "Reagan vs. the Scientists: Why the President is Right about Missile Defense," Commentary, January 1984, pp. 23-32.

Robert Foelber and Brian Green, "Space Weapons, the Key to Assured Survival," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 327, February 2, 1984.

Clarence A. Robinson, Jr., "Panel Urges Defense Technology," Aviation Week and Space Technology, October 17, 1983, pp. 16-18.