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Reagan's Strategic Vision for Missile Defense

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It's always a pleasure to come back to Heritage. An invitation from The Heritage Foundation, obviously, is always very special—only more so when it provides an opportunity to talk about Ronald Reagan's visionary Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). I'm sure [Heritage President] Ed Feulner thought, "Well, if we're going to talk about Star Wars, we might as well invite Darth Vader." I'm happy to accept.

I see many friends in the room tonight. I'm reminded of a tribute once given to Ed and the supporters of The Heritage Foundation—comments that are still apt today. We are "unlucky in many things in our time, but among our blessings is the quality of those, so many of them here tonight, who have risen to defend our heritage. It is they whom we gather here to celebrate. Their industry, learning, wit, generosity: their passion for our country and its ideals."

Buckley on Reagan

Those are the words of William F. Buckley, Jr., whose passing two weeks ago we still feel very deeply. Bill Buckley is himself now a cherished part of our national heritage, and the writings he left behind will inform, enlighten, and amuse for generations to come. We'll never again meet anyone quite like him.

Last year Bill published a book of his correspondence from *National Review*, and included an exchange of letters with a man from Illinois named Kelly. Each was only one sentence in length. First came this: "Dear Mr. Buckley: Your syntax is horrible." Then Bill's reply: "Dear Mr. Kelly: If you had my syntax, you'd be rich."

Talking Points

- In March 1983, President Ronald Reagan announced an initiative to build strategic defenses for the United States with a system to intercept and destroy ballistic missiles in flight—the Strategic Defense Initiative.
- Reagan's vision of missile defense surely helped accelerate our victory in the Cold War.
- Today, at least 27 countries possess nuclear missiles, including hostile regimes that oppress their own people, seek to intimidate and dominate their neighbors, and actively support terrorist groups.
- In 2001, President George W. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. It was an act of great courage, and it opened the way for major advances in our ability to stand up a defense against missile attack.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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Bill Buckley was always an eloquent, cheerful combatant in the battle of ideas. And he was never more eloquent or effective than when he defended American ideals in the decisive years of the Cold War.

There was, Bill Buckley said, a single “conclusive factor” that protected America from Soviet aggression in the 1980s. That factor was the character of President Ronald Reagan. With Reagan in the White House, Buckley said, the policymakers of “the Soviet Union [knew] that the ambiguists with whom [they] so dearly love[d] to deal [were] not in power” during those crucial years. No one could doubt the confidence of America’s leader, or his utter determination to protect the freedom and security of the American people.

Reagan’s Faith in Americans

This is one of the reasons that average Americans always trusted Ronald Reagan—even the keepers of conventional wisdom—even when they viewed him in contempt. My friend, Lou Cannon, who covered Reagan for more than 30 years, has noted that many who once looked down on the man now admire him—that even [former Russian President] Mikhail Gorbachev calls him a “very great political leader.” It’s the consensus view now, but as Lou Cannon points out, “It was always the view of the guy in the bar.”

Americans also trusted Reagan because they knew he trusted them. He believed in the basic decency, patriotism, and common sense of this country. And like his hero, Franklin Roosevelt, Reagan always took his case directly to the people in plain and forthright terms. He once said, “When all you have to do to win is rely on the good judgment of the American people, then you’re in good shape—because the American people have good judgment.”

I’ve always thought that for Ronald Reagan, his faith in the American people was like a suit of armor. It allowed him to enter the toughest debates with confidence, knowing that he might be assailed, but trusting that things would come out right in the end. And he certainly showed that confidence during the extraordinary month of March 1983.

Reactions to SDI

Twenty-five years ago today, the speech announcing the Strategic Defense Initiative was still being drafted. But in political and diplomatic circles, the news media and academia, everyone was talking about a speech Reagan had given three days earlier. In Orlando, on March 8th, the President had labeled the Soviet Union the “focus of evil in the modern world,” and gave a powerful rebuttal to those who advocated a fad called the nuclear freeze. “I would agree to a freeze,” Reagan said, “if only we could get a freeze in the Soviets’ global desires.”

The President argued the competition of the superpowers was not a chess game between two moral equals. Rather, it was a critical chapter in the age-old conflict of good versus evil. To “call the arms race a giant misunderstanding” and declare “both sides equally at fault,” he said, was to “ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire.” And he refused to yield to those who would “place the United States in a position of military and moral inferiority.”

Not surprisingly, the speech filled the front pages and the editorial pages. Much of the commentary ranged between scornful and brutal. Elite opinion was perhaps best captured in the words of a prominent historian who said, “It was the worst presidential speech in American history, and I’ve read them all.” I know that historian.

But years later, we would learn how much the speech had actually rattled the confidence of the Soviet leadership. After his release from the Siberian gulag, the dissident, Natan Sharansky, told of the joy and the hope that Reagan’s comments had brought to his fellow captives. They had spread the word to each other throughout the prison, even using the toilet pipes so the guards wouldn’t hear them.

At the height of the Cold War, Ronald Reagan had spoken the truth and insisted on moral clarity—and in doing so he brought comfort to the afflicted and shamed their oppressors. Today, a quarter-century afterward, it’s clear that in Orlando, Ronald Reagan gave one of the best and most significant presidential speeches in history.

And then came the speech of March 23rd—another pivotal moment, and the reason for our gathering here tonight. From his desk in the Oval Office, President Reagan announced an initiative to build strategic defenses for the United States with a system to intercept and destroy ballistic missiles in flight.

He noted that the doctrine of nuclear deterrence—preventing aggression by the promise of retaliation—had been successful. Yet he regarded deterrence as “a sad commentary on the human condition.” The human spirit, he said, “must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence.” So he challenged the scientific community to undertake a long-term effort, which he candidly said would probably take decades, to “give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete.”

Once again, Reagan had committed an offense against orthodoxy—and once again criticism was sharp and dismissive. *The New York Times* said Reagan’s vision was a “pipe dream, a projection of fantasy into policy.” Some critics took another tack, saying such strategic defenses would be inherently destabilizing. Such was the logic of many in the establishment—the notion that a purely defensive measure against nuclear-armed missiles would be a threat to others.

The Soviet Reaction

As for the Soviets, they walked away from arms control talks after Reagan kept his pledge to deploy Pershing and cruise missiles in Western Europe. But SDI had gotten their attention, and they sought a return to the bargaining table in order to undermine President Reagan’s policy. When the President met Gorbachev at Reykjavik, Gorbachev demanded that the United States commit to never deploying SDI. Reagan refused.

Some believed Reykjavik was a public-relations disaster. The President could not have cared less. He went on national TV and said he would never shrink from his responsibility to defend the American people. At Reykjavik, Reagan said, “Everything was negotiable except two things: our freedom and our future.” It was without question one of the finest hours of his presidency, or any other.

History moved swiftly after that. As Soviet leaders tried to prevent the collapse of a militarized economy and a costly totalitarian empire, they eventually gave up their demands on SDI. Gorbachev and Reagan agreed to eliminate mid-range ground-launched missiles with the INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] Treaty, and then in 1991 came the START [Strategic Arms Reduction] Treaty and the end of the Cold War.

Reagan’s vision of missile defense surely helped accelerate our victory in the Cold War. There was simply no way the Soviet Union was going to defeat an America so confident in its purposes and so determined to defend itself against nuclear terrorism. This outcome alone is enough to place Ronald Reagan among our greatest presidents.

The ABM Treaty

The world has changed dramatically since the Reagan years. There is no more Soviet Union, and Russia is no longer an enemy. Yet President Reagan would also recognize the other dangers that have emerged, and the urgency of defending ourselves against those dangers. Yes, he would say, the world has changed, but the need for missile defense is still great. And today America does have a President who is strongly committed to a full range of ballistic missile defenses to protect America, our friends, our interests, and the peace of the world.

One of the obstacles President George W. Bush pledged to remove was the old ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty, signed in 1972. The Treaty was out of date, and one of the signatories no longer existed. And over the years, as weapons technology progressed, the ABM Treaty put unrealistic and unsafe restrictions on our ability to defend America. I remember this from my time as Secretary of Defense. We would be thinking ahead to the biggest challenges of the 21st century, and the proliferation of ballistic missiles was always high on the list. And it was clear that the ABM Treaty was going to tie our hands in the years ahead.

The Treaty did permit either party to withdraw on six months’ notice, but politically that wasn’t so easy to do. Several generations of arms-control experts were highly invested in the ABM agreement. They were convinced that American withdrawal

would bring nothing but bad consequences. But in 2000, George W. Bush campaigned on a promise to build missile defenses, and in 2001, he made the wise decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. It was an act of great courage, and it opened the way for major advances in our ability to stand up a defense against missile attack.

The decision made even more sense in light of the attacks of September 11th. As President Bush said, 9/11 “made all too clear [that] the greatest threats to both our countries come not from each other, or other big powers in the world, but from terrorists who strike without warning, or rogue states who seek weapons of mass destruction.”

Today's Challenges

To protect ourselves, we have to understand the world as it is—and to face our challenges squarely. In 1972, nine countries had ballistic missiles. Today, it is at least 27—and that includes hostile regimes that oppress their own people, seek to intimidate and dominate their neighbors, and actively support terrorist groups.

On the Korean peninsula, we all want to see the six-party talks conclude in the complete, verifiable dismantling of Kim Jong Il's nuclear weapons. Yet the fact remains that North Korea today is developing an intercontinental ballistic missile with the potential of striking the American mainland with a nuclear warhead. The North Koreans also today possess a large force of missiles that threaten America's closest allies in Asia and our forces deployed in the region.

North Korea is one of the world's most active proliferators of ballistic missile technology. Pyongyang is a missile supplier to rogue regimes that have provided arms to terrorist groups, whose increasing military capabilities—combined with their aggressive intentions—pose a growing danger to the peace of the world.

Iran is engaged in a long-running effort to build up its missile forces and capabilities. This includes North Korean assistance on medium-range ballistic missiles. Existing Iranian missile and rocket capabilities already threaten U.S. forces in the Middle East, as well as Israel and our Arab partners. Tehran

continues to develop technologies that could lead to its building an ICBM [Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile] capable of striking the United States, perhaps as soon as late in the next decade.

Given all we know about the Iranian regime's hatred of America, its vow to destroy Israel, and its ongoing efforts to develop the technology that could be used for a nuclear weapon, that is a danger every one of us must take seriously.

Syria is receiving assistance from North Korea in building up its missile forces. And Iran has used Syria for years as a transit point to build up the military capabilities of the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah. As we saw in the summer of 2006, Hezbollah now possesses a sizeable rocket force, one that many analysts believe could be capable of targeting some of Israel's major cities.

And, of course, as we have all seen in recent weeks, Tehran may increasingly be turning its sights to inflaming the situation in the Gaza Strip, now controlled by the terrorist group Hamas. In Gaza, crude, homemade weapons meant to terrorize Israeli civilians are being augmented by more advanced, longer-range weapons that are clearly smuggled in from outside.

The Continuing Importance of Missile Defense

It's plain to see that the world around us gives ample reason to continue working on missile defense. In the ongoing political campaign, there's been discussion recently about 3 a.m. phone calls. We all hope that a commander in chief never has to pick up the line and be told that a ballistic missile is heading toward the United States. In such an instance, catastrophe would be minutes away. And the best tool we can leave to a future commander in chief is a weapon of defense to blow that missile out of the sky.

When President Bush and I took office, our country had no capability to defend the American people against long-range ballistic missiles—and, we believed, not enough money was going into research and development and testing of potential defenses. And so, after retiring the ABM Treaty, the President acted to make missile defense operational.

Instead of waiting for the perfect shield, he decided to begin deploying capabilities as soon as possible, and then add to it in the future as technology progresses. By the end of 2004, we had an initial capability in place to defend against limited missile attacks by rogue states or an accidental launch.

And missile defense technology continues to advance. The Patriot system that we all remember from the Gulf War is still in use, but is now much improved, and our sea-based Aegis missile defense system continues to perform very well in its intercept test program. From tests we've conducted in the Pacific, we now believe we have a credible measure of protection against long-range threats from Northeast Asia. The next step is to deploy long-range missile defense in Europe to protect our friends and allies.

There is still a great deal yet to accomplish in the field of missile defense. But we're a lot farther along than we would have been if Ronald Reagan hadn't set this effort in motion 25 years ago. At the end of his address to the nation, Reagan said, "Tonight we're launching an effort which holds the promise of changing the course of human history. There will be risk, and results take time. But I believe we can do it."

Well, time has shown that he was right. We can do this. We are well along in making good on the promise of strategic defense. The project gathers together American idealism, American ingenuity, and American optimism. And that is an unbeatable combination.

Ronald Reagan's successful presidency is testimony to the power of ideas to shape events. Our 40th President understood the impact of words fitly spoken and truths plainly stated. He knew that a speech can make a difference—but he also knew that conviction, perseverance, and confident action are what truly carry the day.

President Reagan didn't live to see his vision fulfilled, and he didn't expect to. But we're getting there. And it's already a better world because of the things he said and did as President of these United States.

So this evening it's most fitting that we recall some of his greatest contributions to the security of our country. The nation is forever proud of Ronald Reagan. And we're filled with gratitude for his lessons and for his legacy.

—*The Honorable Richard B. Cheney is Vice President of the United States. He delivered these remarks at a March 11, 2008, Heritage Foundation event commemorating the 25th anniversary of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative.*