

HOW RONALD REAGAN BOUGHT AND SOLD THE DREAM OF MISSILE DEFENSE

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Ronald Reagan's bold foray into the mystifying world of missile defense may well have been the most controversial military research program since the development of the hydrogen bomb in the 1950s. The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) made its dramatic entrance on to the political stage on March 23, 1983, when Reagan shocked the nation with his proposal of a "long-term research and development program to begin to achieve our goal of eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles" ("Address"). Reagan's announcement immediately generated a flurry of opposition from political and scientific circles, signifying the highly controversial nature of the issue. Critics' objections fell into two major categories. First, members of the scientific community raised doubts about the feasibility of effectively applying the proposed technologies still in nascent stages of development. Second, others questioned the wisdom of pursuing comprehensive missile defense in the context of the Cold War geopolitical situation. Their qualms centered on fears that the program would provoke international responses that would result in a net decrease in US security.

While the well-documented signs of struggle over the issue do not prove whether SDI was right or wrong, they do answer the question of whether or not the policy came from purely rational considerations on a state-actor decisionmaking level. While in its most basic portrayal, the US quest for missile defense may not have been entirely inconsistent with classical and structural realist models of behavior in international relations. After all, the history of armaments has displayed an ongoing succession of actions and reactions, and the advent of the ballistic missile in the Second World War logically drove the search for its countermeasures. Such efforts in the US began shortly after German hostilities ended, and SDI could have been tagged as the logical successor of these efforts.

Arms races do not, however, occur in isolation from international contexts and other developments. Given the specific circumstances of the time, realist models may be at a loss to account for the radical departure from established nuclear doctrine implicit in SDI's goals. US and Soviet leaders alike had by then accepted the doctrine of deterrence, which relied on the

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threat of mutually assured destruction. Moreover, not only was the policy itself a deviation from the status quo, but the policymaking process that conceived of it also seemed to deviate from the realist model of how the government ought to decide issues of such serious gravity.

Therefore, in order to explain the irregular nature of the SDI decision as well as some peculiarly idiosyncratic characteristics of the program, scholars have loosened the realist assumption of unitary rational actors and turned instead to multi-leveled theories of international politics. These have yielded an account of a policy that traces its roots primarily to Ronald Reagan's personality, the political context of the era, and the dynamics of a small policymaking elite.

Technological Obstacles to SDI

From the inception of the program, even the staunchest proponents of the Strategic Defense Initiative had conceded that the technological obstacles would demand substantial time and resources to overcome. Reagan himself acknowledged that it was a "formidable technical task, one that may not be accomplished before the end of this century." ("Address to the Nation") Compounding the operational difficulties already posed by enhancement and integration of existing technologies, the hallmark of SDI design was its reliance on newer, more exotic scientific developments.

Shortly after Reagan's address, the president formed a special commission led by James C. Fletcher to produce an exhaustive report outlining the required elements of a comprehensive missile defense system (US Department of Defense *Defensive Technologies Study* ix). Unlike previous endeavors, namely Safeguard, Sentinel, and the various Nike incarnations, SDI stressed a non-nuclear, multi-layered approach that would have attempted to target incoming missiles in all its launch phases: boost, post boost (or bus-deployment), midcourse, and terminal. Each phase offered unique obstacles and opportunities. The multitiered defense would have in theory served to minimize "leakage" at each stage of an enemy attack (US Department of Defense *Progress and Promise* 8-10). First, planners devised a plethora of kinetic kill vehicles (KKVs), including electromagnetic rail guns, space-based rockets, and ground-based interceptor missiles. Other proposed kill methods, namely directed energy weapons (DEWs) were far more exotic and consisted of various types of lasers and particle beams.

In addition to the speculative nature of the proposed intercept technology, the overall targeting process may have been even more problematic. SDI needed sensors that could perform the real-time tasks of acquiring a target, tracking its trajectory, and discriminating between decoys and reentry vehicles. The resulting information would then have to be fed into a supercom-

puter to coordinate the various elements of the SDI architecture. The challenge of designing the supercomputer's software was alone daunting: According to the Fletcher Report:

Very large (order of 10 million lines of code) software that operates reliably, safely, and predictably will have to be deployed. Fault-tolerant, high performance computing will be necessary. It must be maintenance-free for ten years, radiation-hardened, able to withstand single-event upset, and designed to degrade gracefully (*Defensive Technologies Study* 8-10).

Lastly, on top of all these requirements, all components would have to be survivable enough to withstand the concussive blast effects and electromagnetic pulse of a nuclear explosion (*Defensive Technologies Study* 8-10).

In view of the difficulties, skeptics of SDI asserted at the time that no foreseeable technological advance would permit any true shift in strategic balance towards defense-dominance (Bundy). Nobody seriously believed that the Soviet Union would sit idly by as the US casually shifted the global strategic balance. An interagency intelligence assessment coordinated by the CIA concurred with expert opinion from nongovernmental circles in predicting that the Soviets would respond to the program by devising a multitude of relatively simple technical countermeasures (US Central Intelligence Agency). For instance, with regard to boost phase directed energy weapons, innovations such as heat shielding and rotating launch vehicles could undermine the defense. The list of possibilities goes on for defying every tier of SDI, including filling outer space with garbage, launching overwhelming salvos of missiles, and deploying MIRVs or decoys (M. Fitzgerald 224).

Worse yet, the amount of spending on offensive systems required by the Soviet Union to offset any US spending on defensive systems was estimated in the 1960s to be roughly one offensive dollar to roughly every three defensive dollars (Pratt 19). And finally, in the event of an actual armed confrontation the vulnerability of the defense system itself remained. The aforementioned skeptics pointed out that "no one has been able to offer any hope that it will be cheaper and easier to deploy and defend large systems in space than for someone else to destroy them" with anti-satellite weapons (ASATs) (Bundy).

Security Theory Issues Raised by SDI

On the level of strategic and political planning, which corresponded directly with the technological planning, SDI set itself apart from ballistic missile defense attempts of the 1970s by its bold strategic aims. After the Sentinel became Safeguard under Richard Nixon, the US had sought a BMD that would have merely strengthened deterrence by providing point defense

of land-based ICBM facilities (Pratt 87). Reagan, on the other hand, insinuated far greater ambitions in his call to render ballistic missiles “impotent and obsolete,” suggesting a reversion to the doctrine of area defense that US policymakers had long since abandoned (“Address to the Nation”). It was this sweeping vision of BMD that both rankled SDI’s opponents and captivated the imaginations of its supporters. Opponents warned that, because of the unconventionalities of nuclear strategy, the program would jeopardize a relatively stable strategic relationship with the Soviet Union, damage the arms control regime, and open a new venue in outer space for a costly and dangerous arms race.

Before 1983 and as early as the Kennedy Administration, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara had recognized that as long as both sides continued to build nuclear weapons, neither could foster any hope of winning a counterforce nuclear exchange without risking “unacceptable damage” to its own countervalue targets (F. Fitzgerald 93). Retaliatory capabilities thereby created a condition that was hence punningly dubbed “mutually assured destruction,” or M.A.D. Subsequent US strategic planning centered on this assumption, and focused on building a survivable nuclear triad composed of bomber aircraft, land-based ICBMs, and submarine-launched missiles. Solidifying the deterrence relationship, the Soviets had likewise accepted M.A.D. as their guiding principle (M. Fitzgerald 220).

In light of the prevalence of M.A.D., McNamara joined several other veteran Cold War military officers in speaking out against SDI as soon as Reagan made his announcement (Bundy). In a 1984 article in *Foreign Affairs* they criticized the program as a reflection of “technological hubris” and attacked its strategic and political foundations. Reagan’s use of SDI to seek an end to the nuclear threat failed to consider other means of delivery against which BMD technologies would have done little, including stealth cruise missiles, bombers, or smuggling (US Central Intelligence Agency 7). Despite its poor prospects for success, McNamara and the others worried that the SDI policy would stimulate an arms race for both offensive and defensive weapons and increase US-Soviet tensions (Bundy).

European allies in NATO had their own misgivings about the Strategic Defense Initiative’s implications for their own security. Some saw the policy as evidence supporting a broader trend of US foreign policy to move toward an isolationist “fortress America” philosophy. Given their reliance on extended deterrence offered by the American nuclear umbrella, Europe watched the missile defense debate with nervous apprehension, and several leaders voiced their objections publicly (Godson 3). As time went on, according to American diplomats, Western Europe’s collective hope was that SDI would simply die quietly from lack of US political support (Godson 29).

Potential Soviet reaction from the other side of the Iron Curtain was also

cause for concern. Opponents of missile defense raised the possibility that missile defense research would exacerbate the security dilemma between the US and Soviet Union. Robert Jervis points out that security dilemma is most prone to occur when the distinction between offensive and defense weapons is ambiguous, and in the context of nuclear deterrence an additional paradox arises such that “offensive weapons are those that provide defense” (192, 197). Accordingly, even though Reagan emphatically insisted that the defensive systems would “threaten no one,” the Soviets responded with loud protestations against what they saw as US provocation. From their view, coupling SDI with the US refusal to publicly renounce a nuclear first strike confirmed their suspicions that the US was looking to break out of deterrent constraints. In addition, Soviet negotiators pointed out that SDI equipment with hard-target kill capability, once deployed globally, could potentially serve as a whole new brand of first strike weapon (M. Fitzgerald 216).

Last but not least of the concerns for US-Soviet relations was the damage that SDI could have inflicted on the Antibalistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and on the arms control regime as a whole. American arms control proponents joined Soviet arms control negotiators in protesting SDI’s endangerment of the agreement. Besides intensifying the arms race by reintroducing competition in previously banned systems, critics further warned that the additional tensions would destroy prospects for better relations and other agreements in the future (Garthoff 99).

Despite Reagan’s assurances that the United States would honor its treaty obligations, fears for the future of the ABM Treaty were not completely unfounded. On October 11, 1985, Reagan wrote in a decision directive that “we have gained new insights into how this treaty can be objectively interpreted” and called for a more permissive interpretation because US “unilateral assertions about what the ABM Treaty did restrict concerning advanced defensive technologies is not clearly demonstrable in terms of the treaty as written, nor in the associated negotiating record.”¹ The ABM Treaty’s chief negotiator wrote in response that the reinterpretation was a “radical change in a central provision of the treaty” (Smith A6). The Soviet Union later softened its bargaining position to that of asking for the restriction of SDI to laboratory research, but the contention over SDI and the ABM Treaty persisted through the end of Reagan’s term.

Limitations of Rational and Structural Theories

The point to take from discussions of these contravening technical and strategic arguments is that, given the abundance of strategic commentary and technological information available, it is clear that US policymakers were conscious of the problems associated with their choice of policy. The loom-

ing question remains, then, why they chose to proceed with the implementation of the Strategic Defense Initiative in spite of the controversy. The application of a realist analysis may leave several facets of SDI unexplained, but furnishes a good starting point for the search for alternative analyses.

Edward Teller, an influential physicist whose advocacy of the hydrogen bomb had earned him a reputation as a Strangelovian character obsessed with mass destruction, was the self-appointed technocratic proselytizer of SDI's virtues. Teller, among other advocates, recognized what he perceived as key technological innovations that held the potential to shift the strategic balance. Paramount to Teller's argument was the fear-mongering notion that if the United States refused to embrace and exploit the new wave of scientific progress, then the Soviet Union would gain critical strategic advantages (Teller 10).

Indeed, preoccupations with Soviet supremacy or prospective Soviet supremacy featured prominently in most pro-SDI documents and publications of the early 1980s. Though Reagan's March 1983 speech refrained from harping on the Soviet threat, subsequent documents generated by the Reagan Administration indicate a strong suspicion of Soviet military intents and capabilities:

The Soviet Union has failed to show the type of restraint, in both strategic offensive and defensive forces, that was hoped for when the SALT Process began. The trends in the development of Soviet strategic offensive and defensive forces, as well as the growing pattern of Soviet deception and of non-compliance with existing agreements, if permitted to continue unchecked over the long-term, will undermine the essential military balance and the mutuality of vulnerability on which deterrence theory has rested ("Fact Sheet" 2).

The main instance of non-compliance to which the document refers was the erection of a phased-array radar near Krasnoyarsk, deep within Soviet territory. Many US scientists viewed it as a blatant violation of the ABM Treaty that would give the Soviets a significant missile-tracking capability for a missile defense architecture. With regard to Soviet offensive capabilities, Reagan likewise raised concerns about a Soviet counterforce first-strike capability (Reagan *An American Life* 653). Therefore, to couch the surrounding strategic conditions in neorealist terms, a compelling imperative could have existed for the US to hedge against Soviet military advancements, if one accepts the underlying assumptions of Soviet aggression. Alternatively, one could say that a self-preserving US was merely reacting to exogenous forces when it decided to engage in a policy of military buildup.

Structural realism, however, could not have readily predicted the specific quality or magnitude of buildup. The United States could have just as easily engaged in either a quantitative buildup of or qualitative modifications to

its nuclear arsenal to make it more lethal or survivable. These offensive arms buildups would have proven cheaper and more consistent with the status quo nuclear strategies. Instead, not only did the US choose to revive its interest in defenses, but unprecedented types of defenses as well. For the first time since the signing of the ABM Treaty, area defenses were considered as a real option.

This is not to say that the area defense doctrine was the steadfast goal of SDI on a continual basis. Some analyses point out how the policymakers never settled the issue of whether SDI aimed to achieve a deterrence-strengthening point defense or deterrence-supplanting area defense (Godson 10). Different levels of US officials seemed to make contradictory statements regarding the program's goals: while the administration's inner circle spoke of a leakproof "astrodome" defense that would protect populations, the director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO) and other intermediate bureaucrats envisaged a less ambitious partial defense to protect silos (Reiss 53-54). Reagan himself wavered constantly on the issue, stating a different goal depending on the framing of the question at the time (Bjork 80). These contradictions between SDI's stated goals hint at an absence of an overriding strategic underpinning to the policy (Reiss 53; F. Fitzgerald 199).

Moreover, this uncertainty in its objectives was compounded by the aforementioned technological, political, and strategic problems that may have indicated that SDI was perhaps a sub-optimal solution. It follows that the Reagan Administration's decision for a missile shield may be better explained by theoretical alternatives to state-level rationality. The subsequent discussion will explore the program's roots using decisionmaking theories and other levels of analysis, and will show that various factors converged to spawn biased and overoptimistic assessments.

Reagan's Personality and Predispositions

A great deal of commentary often attributes the program's genesis solely to Reagan's individual vision or whim, with the word choice depending on the particular commentator's opinion of Reagan. While such sweeping claims clearly do not capture the full complexity of the process, they do hold some truth. Most historians would likely agree that the Strategic Defense Initiative could not have reared its head with the same vigor in the 1980s without the driving force of Reagan's personal dedication to the cause. Along the same line of reasoning, Lakoff and York point out that the "election of a president with a mandate to support" a weapons program is a key to the program's success (259).

Reagan himself took full credit for the project: in his interview with Lou Cannon, he adamantly maintained that it was "my idea to begin with"

(Cannon 717). Of course, this assertion must be viewed with same degree of skepticism as one would view any personal statement; Cannon points out that taking responsibility was Reagan's way of reacting to criticisms of his knowledge or effectiveness (717). Nevertheless, much evidence shows that Reagan did enter presidential office with some political and ideological predispositions that may have rendered SDI an acutely attractive option for him. First, Reagan proved himself to be both a fierce anticommunist and foreign policy hawk early in his presidency, and these sentiments endured at least until the end of his first term (Farnham 225). Cannon wrote that "he was convinced that Communist systems were antithetical to the will of God and the highest aspirations of humanity." Reagan did not hesitate to express such views in public either. During his famous "evil empire" speech, he used the language of morality and religion to bolster his plans for accelerated military spending (Reagan "Address to the National Convention").

It was these preconceptions of the Soviet Union that colored his interpretation of Soviet actions. One good example arose in his first press conference, when he blasted Nixon's détente by accusing the Soviets of "reserv[ing] unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" in order to attain their aggressive aims (F. Fitzgerald 184). From this type of outlook naturally flowed an aversion to, or at least skepticism for, arms control agreements which he perceived as asymmetrically constraining US actions in the face of Soviet noncompliance. The ABM Treaty was the most pertinent case in point.

Psychological analyses of Reagan have yielded a plethora of explanations for his dispositions, even if some seem slightly far-fetched. One group of explanations deals with his deep-seated spirituality and superstitions. In particular, Reagan was fixated on the biblical concept of Armageddon, in which a great war between good and evil would herald the second coming of Jesus Christ. Reagan's National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane ascribed the president's fascination with SDI to this idea (Broad 98).

Another grouping of these accounts proposes that movies were highly influential in crafting his cognitive structures. Colin Powell believed Reagan's inspiration for proposing to share SDI technology with the Soviets came from the utopian desires of a space alien in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Cannon 292). Others hypothesize that Reagan may have placed undue faith in the utility of SDI because of his lead role in *Murder in the Air*, in which his secret agent character guards a miracle weapon that promises to "make America invincible in war and therefore be the greatest force for peace ever invented." (Lakoff and York 7) On a more general level, Cannon contends that the influence of movies is part of a broader tendency by Reagan to define his reality in terms of stories, both fiction and nonfiction (Cannon 294).

Reagan often read popular fiction at the expense of time spent on poli-

cy briefings, which may explain some small part of his generally poor understanding of basic issues (Cannon 294). On the vital question of the nuclear balance, Reagan failed to grasp for some time the notion that the Soviet Union might have felt reciprocally threatened by the United States. This stunning realization struck to him only after the occurrence of a series of highly tense events that began with the Soviet downing of a Korean airliner (KAL 007) (Farnham 232). Likewise, multiple authors assert that Reagan never fully understood the nuances of deterrence logic (Bjork 157).

Furthermore, not only did the more subtle intricacies of strategic doctrine escape him, but he additionally demonstrated a disturbing unawareness of the simplest technical details; for instance, Reagan spent an entire year in office without realizing that the Soviet nuclear threat occurred primarily from large land-based ICBMs (Cannon 291). Another oft-cited example of his ignorant idealism is the depiction of his alarm upon discovering that, despite the space debris-tracking capabilities of NORAD, no BMD existed (Herken 208). Hence, many of his policy positions stemmed purely from firm but factually uninformed convictions that he held on a small number of select issues. To compensate for his ignorance, Reagan relied heavily on aides, who may have exercised excessive influence over policy directions and offered flawed advice (Cannon 292; Greenstein 149).

Reagan's general lack of understanding for policy minutiae, however, did not prevent him from adopting strong orientations on those policies that referenced any of his core principles or stereotypes. Where an issue triggered one or more of these core concerns, pre-established operational codes dictated his position (Kessel 256). In the specific case of SDI, the program pertained to two of his core issues of nuclear security and US-Russian relations, which probably paved the way for strong decisional prejudice on his part.

The aggregate of all these observable belief systems and cognitive structures seems to indicate that Reagan was probably inclined to favor SDI for the same reasons that he stated in his public rhetoric. Even his idealistic offer to share the technology with the Soviet Union was genuine (Reagan *An American Life* 631). Cannon summarizes Reagan's thinking as follows:

Reagan totally believed in his science-fiction solution he had proposed without consultation with his secretary of state or his secretary of defense.... [He] was convinced that American ingenuity could find a way to protect the American people from the nightmare of Armageddon. As he saw it, the Strategic Defense Initiative was a dream come true (Cannon 333).

Beyond the rhetoric, Reagan's deep personal commitment to SDI revealed itself in plenty of his actions in the course of its creation and evolution. In February 1983, Reagan asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to propose a foundation for a "new strategic vision." BMD was only one of five

proposals that came out of the meeting, but Reagan, who clearly had BMD in mind already, immediately attached himself to the idea (Herken 211). After the JCS had agreed in nebulous terms that the concept was vaguely worth studying, they were shocked the next month with how quickly Reagan went public on it with his March 1983 speech (Broad 125).

Evidently, Reagan's personal actions and intents played a substantial role in establishing and maintaining the Strategic Defense Initiative. Still, he alone could not have succeeded in sustaining the program or even getting it off the ground without the knowledge and support of his staff at several key junctures. This support was not always enthusiastic, and did not always come immediately. At the outset many of them were either opposed to the form of SDI that Reagan presented or opposed to the idea altogether (F. Fitzgerald 198).

Political Effects on the Contour of SDI

Despite the many anecdotes documenting Reagan's general lack of policy knowledge and reasoning ability, some scholars redeemed him somewhat using Howard Gardner's classifications of multiple intelligences. In particular, Cannon and Greenstein declare that while Reagan may have ranked low in "logical-mathematical" intelligence, he compensates for it with plentiful "interpersonal," "bodily-kinesthetic," and "emotional and language intelligence" (Greenstein 157; Cannon 137-38). These traits translated to exceptional political skills, and such prowess would have given him a keen ability to recognize expedient policy responses to the political exigencies of the era.

The political impetus for the SDI program emerged as early as the 1980 election campaign. At the time, though, the SDI conception of missile defense was mostly championed as a cause of the far right, and any public support of it would have equated to "political suicide" (Broad 102). Instead, a more public campaign materialized in that year's Republican platform, which called for a number of "peace through strength" measures. Among them was a proposal for both active and passive defenses that would match capabilities with the Soviet nuclear-tipped ABM system then deployed in Moscow (Lakoff and York 7; F. Fitzgerald 119). Given the prominence of foreign policy issues at the time, Reagan's election lent authority to a politically centrist sentiment that called for not necessarily achieving dominance, but "negotiating from strength." (Reiss 82) Essentially, the American public had largely rejected détente as an excuse for the Soviet Union to gain superiority. Perceptions of Soviet aggression, which were the impetus for the confrontational "Reagan Doctrine," which called for a renewed military buildup to counter perceived Soviet strength increases, easily assimilated the BMD facet of the Republican's platform (Lakoff and York 36-37).

The origins of SDI in political contexts may clarify some of its peculiar and confusing characteristics as a defense program and a foreign policy. First, politics may explain why the SDI-bolstering rhetoric of looming Soviet threats did not match the program's stated emphasis on long-term laboratory research ("Strategic" 1). Instead, the proclaimed pure research orientation of SDI may have stemmed from the desire to insulate the program from controversies regarding its technological feasibility and strategic prudence (Bjork 86). After all, according to the reasoning, any discussion of such details was premature for the program's scope at the time.

This motivated avoidance of controversy lends insight into the Reagan Administration's wavering and incongruous statements on SDI's strategic aims. The debate over area defense versus point defense had strong implications for the overall desirability of the program, and motivated policymakers had strong incentive to postpone it. Instead, SDI's ambivalent aims and rhetorical posture of pure research insulated it from criticism and "provided self-perpetuating momentum for the program." (Bjork 86).

The importance of the political motivations for SDI also explains the poor coordination of constituent elements and its general lack of research focus. After all, Clark and McFarlane embarked on a mission to bypass normal procedures for new technology by "skirt[ing] congress, the bureaucracy, and the media." (Lakoff and York 16) This departure from norms showed. William Broad's describes SDI as "basically a scientific free-for-all, a license to spend tens of billions of dollars as creatively as possible.... No concept seemed too wild." The x-ray laser was not even the most off-the-wall proposal: SDI had allocated lavish amounts to researching antimatter weapons (Broad 138). In the program's political context, the more outlandish the concept, the more appealing it seemed.

Moreover, politically motivated overoptimism colored the few progress assessments that were conducted. For instance, several Reagan-appointed members of the Fletcher and Hoffman panels had serious conflicts of interest due to their ties to military industry (Reiss 69). Dissenting opinions of non-governmental scientists on the other hand, such as those of members of the Federation of American Scientists and Union of Concerned Scientists, were treated dismissively (Lakoff and York 266). Indeed, in a spectacular display of motivated bounded rationality, Washington preemptively discredited them before they uttered their views: a CIA report predicted that the Soviets would "make use of" the scientific community, along with "academicians, journalists, and other agents of influence" to "conduct political influence operations" (US Central Intelligence Agency viii, 1).

The net effect of all these less-than-rational behaviors was an unrealistic program that was self-deluding in its progress and ineffective in achieving any of its purported technological or strategic aims. Such decisionmaking dis-

tortions manifested in all aspects of the program, including budgeting. According to a General Accounting Office study, “the efficient pursuit of SDI research and development has been unnecessarily hampered by the persistence of the administration and the SDIO in making plans and starting projects on the basis of unrealistic and overly optimistic funding requests and schedules” (GAO 1).

Competing Explanations: Organizations and Special Interests

A policy decision on the order of magnitude of Strategic Defense Initiative was bound to draw from a wide range of influences simply by virtue of its far-reaching implications for various individuals, organizational actors, and special interests. In the specific case of SDI, though, much evidence indicates that these influences did not figure in as much as the overriding factors of personality and political context.

First, the largely atypical top-down nature of the decision does not seem to give credence to an organizational theory explanation. Similar exotic technological imperatives such as the “beam gap” had sparked considerable resistance from the defense establishment in the 1970s (Pratt 87). In general, large organizations’ standard operating procedures tend to oppose sweeping changes such as the ones SDI would have inflicted upon military strategic doctrine. With military hardware in particular, SDI constitutes a reversal of the usual progression in which advances in technology drive advances in doctrine, not the reverse. Even in the nuclear weapons revolution in military affairs, the ICBM and nuclear bomb were merely inventions that performed existing functions more effectively (Lakoff and York 256). Outside the defense establishment, SDI met with further opposition from other government organizations; the State Department had secretly hoped that the proposal would fizzle quietly, and the Heritage Foundation accused its diplomats of undermining Reagan’s efforts to gain foreign acceptance of the program (Godson 29).

The bureaucratic politicking facet of organizations does not offer much insight into the development of the decision either. While it is true that SDI eventually ended up serving numerous expansionist bureaucratic interests for funding and personnel, the military’s usual offense-bias probably stirred them to oppose the project for fear that SDI would sap funds from other research. Only after this possibility disappeared did the military sit passively on the issue (Lakoff and York 328). The bureaucratic drive for BMD only came later when Reagan created the SDIO, whose survival hinged on the continuation of SDI research (Reiss 64). In short, bureaucratic politics played a role in the perpetuation, but not the creation, of SDI.

Most of the special interests influences within the military industrial

complex, namely from military industries, likely materialized along the same scheme as the bureaucratic interests. Such industries generally lobby on a “follow-on imperative” to directly replace completed contracts with ones of essentially the same nature (Kurth). Since SDI mandated work on previously unfunded high-tech areas, no such imperative applied (Reiss 9).

That leaves the various non-profit pro-SDI special interest groups—including the Laser Lobby, High Frontier, and Teller’s group at the Heritage Foundation—which lobbied Reagan and other members of his Administration heavily in the time preceding Reagan’s March 1983 announcement. Of all the major players in the administration, however, they only truly managed to reach Reagan himself, who was unusually receptive to the idea from the start. And even Reagan failed to make mention of any of Teller’s hallmark rhetoric on what critics dismissed as “Buck Rogers weaponry” in his speech (F. Fitzgerald 208-209).

Competing Explanations: Realism’s Reprise?

In hindsight, realist rationalist theory has produced other justifications for the ultimate outcome of SDI that are only peripherally related to the nuclear balance. The first explanation that has arisen in the wake of the Cold War raises the possibility that SDI was a calculated decision that aimed simply to place pressure on a faltering Soviet economy by imposing military spending demands that it could not support. Indeed, Margaret Thatcher has stated her belief time and again that “it was the determination to embark upon the SDI program and to continue it that eventually convinced the Soviet Union that they could never, never, never achieve their aim by military might” (Reiss 192).

In practice, though, little evidence suggests that policymakers actually considered the economic externalities when they chose to pursue SDI, and it is even harder to prove that the decision turned on these factors. While it is true that SDI-inspired Soviet arms expenditures very likely contributed in part to the fall of the Soviet Union, analysts must be cautioned against the temptation to infer intentions from results. Rather, only explicit evidence can prove with certainty that this consideration played a significant role.

Reagan never mentions in his autobiography that the weak Soviet economy was one of his rationales for SDI, and presumably a desire for self-aggrandizement should have definitely driven him to remember such a detail if it were true. After all, Reagan would have liked to be remembered as a visionary, and demonstrating such foresight would have helped his case appreciably. On the other hand, this explanation is not so easily dismissed since Reagan was well aware of Soviet economic woes and he had on at least one occasion pursued a deliberate foreign policy of economic coercion. In

1982 Reagan tried to convince European allies to impose credit sanctions on the Soviet Union but was unable “to persuade them to apply as much economic pressure on the Soviet Union as I thought we should to do accelerate the demise of Communism” (Reagan *An American Life* 558). Furthermore, the aforementioned interagency intelligence assessment explicitly predicted that increased Soviet military spending in response to SDI would “place substantial additional pressures on the Soviet economy and confront the leadership with difficult policy choices” (US CIA 1). In short, it is entirely possible that the goal of economic coercion was one of many components of the decision, even if it was probably not one of the central issues.

The other realist interpretation that emerged postulates that SDI was conceived to put diplomatic pressure on the Soviet Union, in hopes of exacting a favorable arms control agreement. Such a policy would have been consistent with public opinion at the time; a small majority favored strategic defense but most also favored trading it away in favor of a good arms control agreement (Godson 17). Unfortunately, the “bargaining chip” explanation fails to hold if one accepts the notion that SDI was made possible in large part by the Reagan’s personal commitment. In addition to telling Soviet leaders “a hundred times” that SDI was not a bargaining chip, he even walked out on the 1986 Reykjavik summit when Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev proposed limiting SDI research to the laboratory (*An American Life* 558; Garthoff 287). By several accounts, including those of officials within his administration, Gorbachev had offered Reagan a highly attractive trade that Reagan should have accepted if he had been looking to trade SDI away at all (Garthoff, 285-286).

Despite their use as thought experiments, determining the validity of such post-mortem evaluations on decisionmaking is difficult without concrete proof of their presence in deliberations. Nevertheless, just because the top decisionmakers may not have weighted these factors heavily does not mean that they did not play a subtle role in the formation of SDI. For example, according to Frances Fitzgerald, Robert McFarlane had in his own mind conceived of the program as “the greatest sting operation in history” to reel in the Soviets on arms control (195). But his idea took on a life of its own: “For [Reagan] the idea of anti-missile defenses had an appeal in itself. My own concepts for leveraging Soviet behavior were lost on him” (F. Fitzgerald 195). Hence, even if rational realist motives may not have accounted for the whole story, they still may have entered the decisionmaking process in some form. But it is difficult to gauge the effects of this mechanism.

Conclusion

One lesson to be learned from the experience with Reagan’s Strategic

Defense Initiative is that controversial policy decisions of such huge proportions and far-reaching consequences are not likely to be the exclusive creation of any one decisionmaking mechanism or level of analysis. In this case, various elements interacted with each other to produce the final outcome.

Reagan's personal predispositions made him particularly amenable to concept of an impenetrable missile "shield in space," and the lobbying of Edward Teller and other nonprofit special interests may have augmented effects of these cognitive tendencies. His personal drive alone, however, hit a dead end without any political opportunities for him to implement his vision. That opportunity finally came with changes in the domestic political climate that demanded some type of drastic response. SDI offered a convenient solution for policymakers who were under intense pressure both from these domestic political forces and perceived threats from abroad.

The most interesting part of this process was every actor at each juncture had the same underlying interest in mind—the promotion of US security in the face of the Soviet nuclear threat. The type and direction of pressure they applied varied not because of differing values, but rather because of differing opinions on the means to advance them. This reinforces the notion that the combination of different decisionmaking elements can produce potentially sub-optimal results, despite good intentions.

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