



## INFORMATION SERIES

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### **Commemorating the Fortieth Anniversary of President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative Speech**

Dr. Michaela Dodge

*Dr. Michaela Dodge is a Research Scholar at the National Institute for Public Policy.*

Forty years ago, on March 23, 1983, President Ronald Reagan delivered a speech containing an audacious call to reverse the conventional wisdom of the day – that homeland vulnerability is unavoidable and stabilizing, while defenses are useless and destabilizing. Most people remember this Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) as a call to deploy a missile defense system for the U.S. homeland, an idea deemed so fantastic at the time that the speech and subsequent research efforts took on a pop culture moniker, “Star Wars.”

President Reagan asked, “What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?”<sup>1</sup> In doing so, the President advocated for no less than a change in the U.S. nuclear weapons policy paradigm, which then largely drew from Secretary Robert McNamara’s concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD). This “balance of terror” paradigm called for massive retaliation to be the cornerstone of deterrence against the Soviets and assurance for U.S. allies. The paradigm was so prevalent, and indeed codified into law by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty with the Soviet Union, that all but the most limited short-range missile defense systems were considered destabilizing, escalatory, and incentivizing a Soviet first strike.<sup>2</sup>



### **“Wouldn't it be better to save lives than to avenge them?”<sup>3</sup>**

Reaction to the speech and to the administration's subsequent SDI development program was as swift as it turned out to be wrong. Few people were convinced that the President's vision could become reality, largely on the grounds of technological difficulties, even among those who did not approve of the “balance of terror” paradigm being the basis for U.S. nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Most experts and politicians, including initially British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, believed that the United States and allies would end up in a more dangerous situation with missile defense than without it because missile defense would enable the United States to retreat into “fortress America” and weaken its commitment to European allies.<sup>4</sup> She was not the only skeptic. In the words of Strobe Talbott, a journalist who later became Deputy Secretary of State during the Clinton Administration, the SDI program would lead to, , “unceasing competition without stability.”<sup>5</sup> Another critique stated that “deploying defensive systems or...increasing their capability to destroy the opponent's forces first, will almost certainly be futile, because these efforts will lead to more nuclear offensive arms for both and may add to the danger of a nuclear holocaust.”<sup>6</sup>

Nowhere is it more apparent just how wrong the critics were than in comparing their predictions regarding the effects of the SDI on arms control to what actually happened.<sup>7</sup> “You cannot have SDI and arms control at the same time,” then-Senator John Kerry (D-MA) articulated - a widely shared belief.<sup>8</sup> Prominent statesmen, including Robert McNamara himself, argued that “...it is possible to reach good agreements, or possible to insist on the [SDI] program as it stands, but wholly impossible to do both.”<sup>9</sup> After the SDI speech, the Soviets walked out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations. The Soviet departure from the 1986 Reykjavik summit between President Reagan and Soviet Secretary General Mikhail Gorbachev reportedly left U.S. negotiators with “tears in their eyes.”<sup>10</sup> Yet President Reagan refused to give up plans for U.S. defensive activities in space in exchange for a Soviet promise of dramatic nuclear reductions. In fact, as President Reagan mentioned in his March 23<sup>rd</sup> SDI speech, he suggested to Gorbachev that the United States would share defensive technologies with the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, contrary to the critics' dire predictions, the Reagan administration turned out to be one of the most successful arms control administrations in U.S. history. By the end of President Reagan's second term, the Soviets signed the INF Treaty, the first arms control treaty to reduce and eliminate an entire class of offensive nuclear missiles rather than just cap the numbers, and negotiations on START were well underway.<sup>12</sup> It would become the first strategic arms control treaty with on-site verification provisions.

The critics also predicted that the SDI would “trigger a major expansion of the arms race.”<sup>13</sup> But the SDI did no such thing. In fact, the Reagan Administration came into office amidst a massive Soviet nuclear and conventional build up epitomized by President Carter's Secretary of Defense Harold Brown's statement, “Soviet spending has shown no response to U.S. restraint—when we build, they build; when we cut, they build.”<sup>14</sup> U.S. conventional forces were in dire shape, exhausted and demoralized after years of fighting in Vietnam and the



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subsequent lack of modernization during the 1970s, and plagued by a lack of popular support and even the most basic training resources. President Reagan was “appalled” by what he found when he assumed the office, from “American planes that couldn’t fly and American ships that couldn’t sail for lack of spare parts and trained personnel and insufficient fuel and ammunition for essential training.”<sup>15</sup> The Reagan Administration set out to reverse this sorry state of affairs and changed the course of history in the process. The SDI was an important part of this reversal.

### **SDI and Future Technologies**

In addition to political challenges inherent in pursuing a homeland missile defense system, the technologies to build it were rudimentary, expensive, or non-existent when the speech was delivered. The Army had limited experience with nuclear and hit-to-kill interceptors, the former being a political non-starter by the 1980s. The previous U.S. flirtation with a missile defense system had ended promptly after Congress defunded a limited *Safeguard* missile defense program in 1976, less than six months after it reached initial operating capability. President Reagan appreciated the political and technical difficulties that the pursuit of this goal entailed, stating, “I know this is a formidable, technical task, one that may not be accomplished before the end of this century.”<sup>16</sup> Despite technological progress, particularly following George W. Bush Administration’s withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, missile defense remains a difficult technological and political endeavor.

Aside from its strategic value in forcing the Soviets to consider the possibility that their massive investments in missiles might be obviated, and that a new area of competition would open putting further strain on already bad Soviet economy, the SDI program directly contributed to technological advancements in electronics, sensors and detectors, computers, propulsion, communications, and power.<sup>17</sup> For example, the SDI Organization’s (SDIO’s) investments in sensors and detectors and subsequent partnership with the private sector reduced the per pixel cost in sensors and detectors by a factor of 20 (and in some cases 100).<sup>18</sup> The 1994 Clementine lunar mission drew on technologies developed for the “Brilliant Pebbles” space-based interceptor concept and successfully “space-qualified nearly the entire suite of first-generation Brilliant Pebbles hardware...and software.”<sup>19</sup> The lunar portion of the mission was “spectacularly successful” and indicated the existence of water at the lunar poles.<sup>20</sup>

Clementine’s success was in addition to many other spin-off technologies that were developed, improved, and commercialized in a partnership between SDIO and the private sector.<sup>21</sup> They spanned fields as diverse as health (e.g. improvements in surgical implants) to the environment (e.g., nuclear waste clean-up) to the energy sector to improvements in car safety, optical data storage, computer chips, and adaptive optics, among many others.<sup>22</sup> The United States got its value out of the resources it invested into the SDI program.



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### Plus ça change...

Even though most people remember the SDI speech for its emphasis on missile defense, the speech was mostly focused on the importance of nuclear and conventional weapons modernization in light of the rapid Soviet build up. It provided a unifying vision and explained what must be done to overcome the “evil empire.” Back then, as is the case today, the level of defense spending was a contentious issue in Congress. President Reagan said, “Believe me, it wasn’t pleasant for someone who had come to Washington determined to reduce government spending, but we had to move forward with the task of repairing our defenses or we would lose our ability to deter conflict now and in the future.”<sup>23</sup> Between 1980 and 1987, real defense outlays grew by 52 percent and the proportion of the gross national product devoted to defense outlays rose from 5.0 to 6.2 percent.<sup>24</sup> President Reagan’s was the largest peacetime increase in defense spending in modern history.

Today, the United States is not fighting the old Cold War and adversaries have changed. But the national security environment has deteriorated sharply since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, and it appears that new, challenging Cold Wars are emerging with both Russia and China. The end of the previous Cold War allowed the United States a temporary reprieve, reflected in a large defense spending decrease and the conventional and nuclear force posture reductions of the 1990s. The U.S. ability to adjust to the new and much more threatening realities of the new Cold Wars environment,<sup>25</sup> witnessed by China’s revisionist policies and Russia’s invasions of sovereign countries, including its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, has been limited and lagging behind the curve. The country is also lacking a communicator *par excellence* who could deliver a speech akin to Reagan’s 1983 speech.

### Conclusion

Those who continue to appreciate just how visionary President Reagan was, are in good company. Despite her initial opposition to SDI at the time, Britain’s Lady Margaret Thatcher herself stated that “Looking back, it is now clear to me that Ronald Reagan’s original decision on SDI was the single most important of his presidency.”<sup>26</sup> She came to be an avid supporter of missile defenses.<sup>27</sup> President Reagan wanted to share “a vision of the future which offers hope.”<sup>28</sup> He wanted the nation to “turn to the very strengths in technology that spawned our great industrial base and that have given us the quality of life we enjoy today.”<sup>29</sup> With missile proliferation and the rise of revisionist nuclear-armed states, President Reagan’s vision is as salient as ever. One can only hope that it will not take the next 40 years to see its realization.

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Strategic Defense Initiative Address to the Nation*, March 23, 1983, available at <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreagansdi.htm>.





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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this point see Keith Payne, “Redefining ‘Stability’ for the New Post-Cold War Era,” *Occasional Paper* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, January 2021), pp. 1-17, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Payne-OP-distro-1.1.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Strategic Defense Initiative Address to the Nation*, March 23, 1983, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> “The Strategic Defense Initiative – The Other ‘Star Wars,’” Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, November 30, 2015, available at <https://adst.org/2015/11/the-strategic-defense-initiative-the-other-star-wars/>.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Mark W. Davis, “Reagan's Real Reason for SDI,” *Policy Review* (Palo Alto, CA: The Hoover Institution, October 1, 2000), available at <https://www.hoover.org/research/reagans-real-reason-sdi>.

<sup>6</sup> George Rathjens and Jack Ruina, “Nuclear Doctrine and Rationality,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 110, No. 1 (Winter 1981), p. 181.

<sup>7</sup> David Trachtenberg, Keith Payne, and Michaela Dodge, *The “Action-Reaction” Arms Race Narrative vs. Historical Realities* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, March 2021), pp. 21-30, available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Action-Reaction-pub.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> W. Bruce Weinrod, “Strategic Defense: Implications for Arms Negotiations,” *The Heritage Foundation Background*, October 16, 1985, available at [http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf\\_media/1985/pdf/bg463.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/1985/pdf/bg463.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> McGeorge Bundy, George F. Kennan, Robert S. McNamara, and Gerard Smith, “The President’s Choice: Star Wars or Arms Control,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2, Winter 1984/85, pp. 273, 277, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1984-12-01/arms-control-presidents-choice-star-wars-or-arms-control>.

<sup>10</sup> Ken Adelman, “The Phantom Menace,” *Politico Magazine*, May 11, 2014, available at <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/the-phantom-menace-106551/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Meetings With Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev in Iceland,” October 13, 1986, available at <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/50923/address-to-the-nation-on-the-meetings-with-soviet-general-secretary-gorbachev-icel.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> The Soviets signed START I in 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Hans A. Bethe, Richard L. Garwin, Kurt Gottfried and Henry W. Kendall, “Space-based Ballistic-Missile Defense,” *Scientific American*, Vol. 251, No. 4 (October 1984), p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Testimony of Secretary of Defense Harold Brown before the U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on the Budget, *Outlook and Budget Levels for Fiscal Years 1979 and 1980: Hearings Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on the Budget*, 96th Congress, 1st Session, Part 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p. 500, available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=8N9FAQAAMAAJ&pg=PA500&lpg=PA500&dq=%22Soviet+spending+has+shown+no+response+to+U.S.+restraint%E2%80%94when+we+build,+they+build;+when+we+cut,+they+build%22&source=bl&ots=b3gm6YekKu&sig=ACfU3U3K13rVtkNM9V8UzwNYhDj3Fk4e4g&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiOscDnzfHvAhVjD1kFHcssBn0Q6AEwAXoECAIQAw#v=onepage&q=%22Soviet%20spending%20has%20shown%20no%20response%20to%20U.S.%20restraint%E2%80%94when%20we%20build%2C%20they%20build%3B%20when%20we%20cut%2C%20they%20build%22&f=false>.

<sup>15</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Strategic Defense Initiative Address to the Nation*, op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> James A. Abrahamson and Henry F. Cooper, *What Did We Get For Our \$30-Billion Investment in SDI/BMD?* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 1993), available at [http://highfrontier.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/What-for-30B\\_.pdf](http://highfrontier.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/What-for-30B_.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Cooper, “Why Not Space-Based Missile Defense?,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 7, 2001, available at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB989182983690819718>; and Donald Baucom, “The Rise and Fall of Brilliant Pebbles,” *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* (Vol. 29, No. 2: Summer 2004), p. 187, available at



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<http://highfrontier.org/oldarchive/Archive/hf/The%20Rise%20and%20Fall%20of%20Brilliant%20Pebbles%20-Baucom.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Further examples can be found in the following report: Strategic Defense Initiative, *Technology Applications Report*, August 1992, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA338812.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Strategic Defense Initiative Address to the Nation*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Mary Cooper, "The Military Build-Down in the 1990s," in *Editorial Research Reports 1988*, Vol. I, No. 201-16 (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 1988), available at <http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/cqresrre1988042200>.

<sup>25</sup> The author is grateful to Keith Payne for the term "new Cold Wars."

<sup>26</sup> Peter Robinson, "Margaret and Ron," *Hoover Daily Report*, April 9, 2013, available at <https://www.hoover.org/research/margaret-and-ron>.

<sup>27</sup> Rt Hon the Baroness Margaret Thatcher LG OM FRS, "Deterrence is Not Enough: Security Requirements for the 21st Century," *Special Issue Information Series* No. 518, March 23, 2022 (speech delivered December 3, 1998), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/518.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Reagan, *Strategic Defense Initiative Address to the Nation*, op. cit.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

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