

# The Reagan Administration's Strategic Defense Initiative during the Cold War

Written by Ramin Karbasi

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RAMIN KARBASI, JUL 7 2015

Throughout the intensely contentious Cold War era, the US and Soviet Union consistently sought to gain any advantage over the other that was possible. By 1983, the US, under the Reagan Administration, unveiled the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which aimed to “embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that [were] defensive” (Reagan). Calling “upon the scientific community [. . .] who gave [the US] nuclear weapons,” Reagan championed the policy option that he believed would effectively “turn their great talents now to the cause of mankind and world peace” (Reagan). However, President Reagan’s SDI was criticized by opponents who believed it was simply too untenable and, quite literally, outlandish. To support their claims, opponents often cited economic and budgetary concerns along with the sheer physical complexity of the initiative. And now, almost exactly 32 years after SDI’s unveiling in Reagan’s speech, one finds the opposition’s criticism quite well-founded. Proponents of SDI not only fundamentally challenged the period’s logical assumptions concerning nuclear strategy and international politics, but Reagan and his advisers also did not have a reasonable understanding of the technology at the time and they would have been far better served pursuing far cheaper and more reliable alternatives instead.

Introduced during the height of Reagan’s remilitarization of the Cold War, SDI fundamentally challenged the paradigm of latter half Cold War nuclear strategy that was Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Some deterrence strategists, such as Bernard Brodie, contended that strategy always concerns calibrating one’s costs with desired goals and political objective(s) (Rovner Lecture). An opponent of MAD, Reagan’s stated goal with SDI was “to make Mutual Assured Destruction obsolete” (Craig & Logevall 316). Ironically borrowing from the very man who coined ‘MAD,’ Reagan championed Donald Brennan’s belief that it was preferable to build missile defenses instead of relying almost purely on deterrence’s likelihood of working. To that end, he used SDI to call “for replacing mutual assured destruction with mutual assured survival” (Paul et al 46). This goal, however, led to the plan’s immediate denouncement by many strategists who thought “it threatened to undermine the stability of MAD and thus the long peace that had been sustained between the United States and Soviet Union” (Craig & Logevall 316).

The implication of these assertions is quite telling in that each suggests Reagan’s stated goal and initiative were not in line with the popular nuclear strategy of the time. Logically, the critic’s arguments were sound. SDI both threatened the paradoxical security and stability afforded by MAD, and it questioned the ‘Cold War education’ of Soviet leaders who, “like all their predecessors[, lived] in a world of unrelenting power politics and [felt] absolutely reliant on nuclear deterrence for their nation’s security” (Craig & Logevall 317). The move toward the SDI also threatened the delicate nature of international politics at the time, with the *Atlanta Constitution* warning “that the initiative might destabilize the already tenuous military balance between the U.S. and Soviet Union” (FitzGerald 211). The initiative, coupled with Reagan’s arms buildup and extended “support to tyrannical governments that promised to fight communists or other anti-American forces,” contributed to an image of an emboldened and increasingly aggressive US (Craig & Logevall 317). In turn, this perception contributed to the ominous thought that “the White House might be seriously pursuing a first-strike capability” (Craig & Logevall 317). Together, these concerns highlighted a shift in US nuclear strategy and international political posture that severely threatened an already delicate Cold War stability.

What US leadership failed to achieve in its understanding of the logical assumptions of nuclear strategy and

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international politics, it matched in its failure to understand the Strategic Defense Initiative's technology. Undoubtedly, a huge point of appeal for SDI was its level of technological advancement. For instance, Brilliant Pebbles, a project pursued during the early years of the SDI, was conceived as a space-based defense system that would fire very high-speed tungsten metal rods that could neutralize ICBMs while in boost-phase (Rovner Lecture). In response to this fantastical system, and others that included lasers and mirrors, "[d]etractors in Congress and within the peace and social justice community quickly labeled the president's vision 'Star Wars' in order to pejoratively associate the potential defensive shield" with the popular science fiction films (Yanarella 191). Furthermore, the initiative was itself spearheaded by "heavily promoted and often misguided scientific development" (Yanarella 192). And, in the most revealing early findings produced on the scientific realities of the SDI, both the Carter and Garwin reports concluded that "none of the technological proposals for missile defense could achieve the level of technical perfection necessary to secure a 'leakproof' defense umbrella for the United States (and its allies)" when faced with an assault of sophisticated ballistic missiles (Yanarella 193). In the Carter and Garwin reports, opponents of SDI found a logic rooted deeply in science and reason. They found a way to effectively challenge science fiction with science.

However, it is also important to note that the technological debate was not entirely concerned with the relative likelihood of success or failure for the initiative. In fact, the technological issues of the initiative also extended into the areas of policy and decision-making. For instance, as Yanarella notes, the "critical stage of any thick, multi-layered anti-missile system [. . .] involves the boost phase of an enemy missile assault" (193). With only minutes to react at this phase, and the difficulty of discriminating a missile from decoys while it is in its mid-course phase, a particularly determined adversary could very simply nullify many of the envisioned benefits of a defense system like the SDI. Moreover, with respect to policy and decision-making, the SDI would require "a 'hair-trigger' launch in the face of any real or apparent Soviet missile strike" (Yanarella 194). Taken together, transferring the hastened decision-making power from the president to a computer would not only conjure issues of a constitutional nature, but also increase the likelihood of escalating tensions far beyond what either side would have hoped for. "False Positives," which involve a satellite or technology's error in falsely detecting an imminent attack, are a very real reality. Almost entirely, if not entirely, placing decision-making power in a computer would be counterintuitive for any defense system seeking to mitigate tensions and possibility of attack.

There were certainly several other defensive options that would have better served US interests, especially in terms of costs and risks. For instance, the US could have continued its acceptance of a reality of mutually assured destruction. In fact, this would not only be significantly less costly, economically, but it was also the most stabilizing option in that it avoided a security dilemma. By building up its defensive capabilities the US would risk signaling the adoption of an increasingly aggressive position against the Soviets and their interests, especially because "missile defense required scientific advances that were much more readily available in the U.S. than in the USSR" (Hey 117). This would, in turn, correspond with a Soviet "attempt to develop their own advanced BMD, using programs they already [had] under way" (NIC M83). And though the Soviets were incapable of competing with a high-level and sustained US effort, one of two things could have conceivably resulted. Either the US would 'break the bank' with a "scientifically questionable space system that might cost more than \$1 trillion by the time it was completed," and which would encounter several failures and setbacks over decades by Reagan's own admission, or the USSR could have built up its offense to the point that it could have effectively 'oversaturated' the US defense shield (Craig & Logevall 316).

On the other hand, the US would have also been very well-served by investing in passive defensive measures over time. Passive defense, which protects "potential targets by such means as warning, mobility, and sheltering, rather than by intercepting an attacking force," would be both less destabilizing and less costly than SDI (Carter & Schwartz 36). These measures include, among other things, hardened silos for land-based ICBMs and civil defense. Designed to endure nuclear strikes, these measures also have a significantly better survivability than any satellite-based space system much more vulnerable to attack. They would also take less time to implement than the decades-long 'trial and error' approach necessitated by the SDI, and they would still allow the US to use "defensive technology to take command of its own destiny [and to] achieve a status of invincibility" (Yanarella 190-191). Finally, though such measures demand funding in the several millions (if not billions) over time, their greater survivability, inherently cheaper costs, and maintenance of the global status quo warrant their further consideration.

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Conclusively, the US' decision to pursue the SDI was understandable given the foreign policy context of the 1980s. That is to say, the SDI was meant to ensure US superiority and security against a formidable Soviet military threat (Reagan). However, it is important to recognize the SDI for what it truly was: "an idea, not a program" (FitzGerald 211). The initiative, which would have taken decades to fully implement, lacked the scientific proof and immediacy necessitated by effective strategy. And while it is unfair to criticize an initiative that still invoked fear into a Soviet leadership uncertain of whether it could sustain a continued competition with the US, there is little doubt that the mere thought of success was the principal cause of this fear and that most alternatives would have produced a similar result. Therefore, this paper finds the decision to pursue the SDI was ultimately unwise given the era's defining nuclear and international political strategy, the fact that US leadership did not fully understand the technology of the initiative, and that pursuit of an alternative option would have been far more effective.

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Written by: Ramin Karbasi  
Written at: Southern Methodist University  
Written for: Dr. Joshua Rovner  
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