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Needed: A Real ABM Defense

By Sam Cohen and Conrad Schneiker



Hoping to fend off a murderous nuclear attack with non-nuclear interceptors is like trying to fend off a charging pack of rabid saber tooth tigers with firecrackers instead of hand grenades. If your family's life depended on it, which defensive weapons should you choose?

A quarter century ago, the U.S. had a limited but real strategic defense against nuclear missiles. It was called the Safeguard ABM (anti-ballistic missile) system, and had nuclear-tipped interceptors. But it no longer exists. It was dismantled decades ago. Now we have *no* ballistic missile defense system.

None. Yet opinion polls show that most Americans believe that if the U.S. were attacked by ballistic missiles, our military could intercept those missiles before damage occurred. The images of Patriot missiles shooting down Iraqi (Soviet) SCUD missiles during the Persian Gulf War have undoubtedly contributed to this dangerously widespread, mistaken belief. The bitter truth is that we stand completely naked and defenseless against a ballistic missile attack.

Real strategic defense in the U.S. was dealt three successive deathblows:

- First, the Defense Department irresponsibly started some ABM construction near large cities, which naturally generated public outrage.
- Second, President Nixon pushed through an inherently immoral ABM restriction treaty for his own political gain.
- Third, President Reagan started the non-nuclear Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) program, a technologically fraudulent fantasy aimed at co-opting the nuclear freeze movement. It failed, abysmally, at a cost of tens of billions of dollars.

Nuclear Interceptors

We still need real strategic defense. But to get it, we must totally reject the politically and morally corrupt policy of trying to co-opt opponents with lies and the policy of spin-doctoring rampant dishonesty as “technological optimism.”

Real strategic defense requires nuclear interceptors to overcome the huge economic and technical disadvantages of the non-nuclear defense systems that inherently favor the

attackers. No technological flights of fancy involving “hitting bullets with bullets” under favorably rigged conditions are going to change that fact. In view of the large number of countermeasures an enemy can employ to overcome non-nuclear defense systems, and the invariable low reliability of non-nuclear ABMs, there is no rational alternative to nuclear-tipped interceptors. Nuclear explosives of the kind developed for Safeguard included the six-kiloton Sprint, which could effectively take out attacking missiles within a radius of tens of yards, and the megaton Spartan, which could reach out to a radius of several miles to destroy missiles. These or similar systems could be launched from the ground, sea, air, or space, and a genuine ABM program would utilize a combination of these launch options to provide in-depth defense.

One of the original rationales for SDI was the need to catch up with Soviet beam-weapons technology — which turned out to be largely mythical. SDI was a floating crap game. The pop-up laser technological centerpiece was soon revealed to be a sham, as was widely suspected. Other allegedly “nearly viable” SDI technologies suffered similar fates. Blatant attempts to buy the endorsement (or silence) of the U.S. technical-academic community by showering them with juicy grants failed to stem reasoned critiques of new SDI toys.

Our SDI “Victory”

The false claim that SDI played a key role in winning the Cold War is a lie. The Cold War “ended” in stalemate, not victory. The U.S. ended up much better off than the Soviets, not because of any Cold War victory, but because the U.S. started out that way. How about a reality check: Did the Soviets ever surrender? No. Did they stop modernizing key nuclear weapons systems? No.

This brings us to the “post-Soviet” threat: to counter it, the U.S. now has a dangerous policy of continuing transfers of high-level nuclear missile-related technology and expertise to China, who may in turn export it to other nations potentially hostile to U.S. interests. We know that Red China has been providing missile technology to Iran, Syria, Libya, and North Korea. All of these terror regimes can serve as “deniable” launch pads for China or Russia. This is the great SDI-inspired Cold War victory?

Some former Soviet officials, trying to curry favor with their U.S. counterparts, find it politically expedient to play along with this SDI myth. But since when do we take the self-serving pronouncements of any politicians of any country at face value? The Machiavellian Soviet policy of playing along with the Reagan- and Bush-era SDI fraud was a transparent attempt to co-opt the same pool of anti-nuclear activists whom Reagan tried to co-opt. The Soviet scheme of taking non-nuclear SDI at face value encouraged the diversion of U.S. resources from a genuine nuclear interceptor-based strategic defense system. It also encouraged increasing levels of intellectual corruption in the U.S. political-academic and military-industrial complexes. Of course, the Soviets “believed” in SDI just like they believed the U.S. should be hobbled by huge national debt.

Rescinding the Lie

To get real strategic defense, the ABM treaty should be unilaterally rescinded. This means acknowledging that many leading alleged SDI proponents in and out of

government were lying about the compatibility of SDI with the ABM treaty. Not surprisingly, the SDI forecasts of near-term technical breakthroughs turned out to have all the veracity of Soviet five-year economic plans. The ABM treaty makes even less sense in a multi-way Mexican standoff with possibly rapidly realigning coalitions.

Would there be widespread opposition to genuine SDI with nuclear interceptors? Of course there would. But taking the unprecedented step of making realistic arguments could greatly diminish such opposition. Many (if not most) “critics of SDI” are not opposed to genuine strategic defense. They only oppose the politically corrupt pork barrel and technically crackpot “Rube Goldberg,” non-nuclear SDI schemes that can’t deliver the real protection. A realistic policy could give a nuclear interceptor strategic defense a level of credibility that non-nuclear SDI never had.

Other countries are going to continue developing nuclear weapons technology and their associated missile delivery systems. We can’t stop that. Within the next decade, the long-range nuclear missile threat to the U.S. can only be expected to increase. This would be to our great disadvantage, and we can readily rectify this by scrapping the immoral Nixon-era ABM treaty. Rather than whining about the failure of the ABM treaty, we should divert more of our spending from intercontinental nuclear weapons to continental defense nuclear weapons.

And when it comes to *our* defenses, we must be reasonable enough to get real and dispense with dishonest non-nuclear profiteering, deploying instead a legitimate nuclear defense.

