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CAN HIGH FRONTIER SHOOT DOWN ITS NAYSAYERS?

Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (known to the public as High Frontier), the non-nuclear, space-based defensive system to enable the United States to shoot down incoming nuclear missiles, is sensible, moral, cost-effective, and non-threatening. So where does its opposition come from?

President Reagan's commitment to a space-based Strategic Defense Initiative was first stated publicly in his nationwide TV address on March 23, 1983. Most of his top defense men are for it, including Secretary Caspar Weinberger, Joint Chiefs Chairman General John W. Vessey Jr., Under Secretary of Defense Fred Ikle, and Science Advisor Dr. George Keyworth.

Even public opinion polls show public support levels for space-borne defenses at a remarkable 75% to 80%. That alone should assure speedy passage in an era when the pollster is the guru of modern politics.

We know it is technologically workable. The "it won't work" syndrome was shot down on June 10, 1984, when the U.S. Army conducted a spectacularly successful test in the South Pacific.

We know that its cost is within reason. A Lockheed vice president publicly stated that it can be built and deployed in five or six years at a price of $25 to $30 billion. Engineers and industrialists say that we can have an actual anti-missile defense for about the same cost ($26 billion) as the Pentagon wants for mere research and development.

If this sum were appropriated at the pace of $5 billion a year, it would be less than 3% of our current military budget. It's less than half the annual amount sunk in the failed CETA make-work project. It's less than a third of what the Carter Administration was willing to pay to put 200 MX missiles on a "Race Track."

Obviously, the Soviets don't like the idea of any American defense and this is echoed in their disinformation outlets. But where does the non-Soviet-influenced opposition come from?

A whole network of bureaucrats, foundation elite, and academics have fashioned their careers by becoming a sort of "lay ministry" of a pseudo-religion called "arms control." Its liturgy is an ingenious fabric of agreements, proposals and counter-offers, laced together by the weird arithmetic of SALT I and II and START.

Psychologically, these people can't bring themselves to accept the notion that their measuring of missiles and crafting of concessions is an exercise in futility. After they have spent years trying to cram technology into the SALT box, they are unable to deal with Reagan's vision of a future in which new technology can obsolete SALT-controlled weapons.

Suppose you are a Pentagon bureaucrat or think-tank expert who for years has been seeking ways to deploy the MX missile under SALT and MAD (Mutual Assured Destruction). You have spent hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars on studies and tests of superhardened silos, multiple firing positions, deceptive basing, and mobile launchers.

Or, suppose you are a State Department or Arms Control and Disarmament Agency bureaucrat who has spent years learning the jargon of arms-control negotiations. You have built your career, advancing in pay and prestige, by specializing in the arcane subject of playing small facets of large and sophisticated weapons like pawns on the chess board of diplomacy.

No wonder you feel threatened by High Frontier with its concept that MAD should be scrapped and that reliance on offensive-only weapons is a mistake, morally as well as strategically. No wonder you feel threatened by High Frontier with its idea that automatic arms control through technology is better and safer than speculative arms control through treaties.

The anti-High Frontier naysayers, having lost most of their arguments after the successful experiment of last June 10, have rallied 'round the strawman that High Frontier should be rejected because a "perfect defense" is impossible. But, we don't need a perfect defense; if we develop the capability of shooting down two-thirds, or even half, of incoming missiles, that is a more powerful deterrent than any treaty.

It's time to put the monkey on the back of the gloom-and-doomers and say that there is no point in continuing arms-control negotiations because it is impossible to achieve a "perfect treaty." American engineers have a better record of achievement than our diplomats, and it is far more likely that we can build a near-perfect space-based defense system than that we can sign a near-perfect treaty.