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THE KEY TO ARMS CONTROL

It's become very clear that number-one on Mikhail Gorbachev's 1985 "wish" list is a ban on Star Wars. This objective ranks ahead of the Kremlin's collateral desires to kill the MX missile, keep Pershing IIs out of Europe, and steal plans for the Stealth bomber.

Gorbachev obviously doesn't believe Helen Caldicott's claims that the Star Wars system "won't work." If it won't work, instead of hysterically demanding that we scrap it, Gorbachev could enjoy a good belly laugh at our multi-billion-dollar boondoggle.

So, Gorbachev took advantage of the big press coverage he received on his recent trip to England to indicate that his condition for "success" in any new round of arms negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union is for President Reagan to scrap his plans for Star Wars.

Gorbachev contended that any U.S. initiative in space would kill any chance of reducing current nuclear armaments. Unless Star Wars is abandoned, he said, "it would be unreal to hope to stop the nuclear arms race."

As reported by the U.S. media, Gorbachev's statements were sandwiched between layers of speculation that he might be Konstantin Chernenko's successor. The liberal press glowingly described Gorbachev as young, better educated, interested in new ideas, "fresh thinking" but not radical, one who calls for "profound reform," relaxed with a good sense of humor, smiling, and having a wife with a Western image.

Gorbachev's attack on Star Wars was not "fresh thinking" but a tactic orchestrated by the Kremlin. Konstantin Chernenko blustered that Star Wars is "a new, additional threat to peace" causing a situation "fraught with baneful consequences." TASS added that "the prevention of a space weaponry race is of key importance."

Star Wars is, indeed, of "key importance" to arms control negotiations. It is so important that, if Ronald Reagan didn't have a Star Wars program, the Soviets wouldn't be willing to talk at all. The possibility that the Reagan Administration might fulfill its promise "to make nuclear war obsolete" (and thereby render useless the Soviet nuclear

arsenal) is precisely what has driven the Russians back to the bargaining table.

Ronald Reagan understands this. He said that the Star Wars program is perhaps "the greatest inducement to arms reduction." That's why he won't discuss defensive weapons with the Soviets without simultaneous negotiations on offensive weapons.

Reagan views Star Wars as a way to end our dependence on offensive weapons. He believes that stability can be enhanced by a mix of defensive weapons and a reduction in the number of highly accurate land-based offensive missiles.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger understands Gorbachev's game. Weinberger says that Star Wars is the "one thing the Soviets seemed to be determined to block" but the United States "will not give up the Strategic Defense Initiative or the opportunity to develop it. It's the only thing that offers any real hope to the world."

National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane also has the smiling Russian's number, saying that Gorbachev's statement was "a little disingenuous. It implies that the Soviet Union surely has no interest in defensive systems, and that's manifestly untrue."

Gorbachev made a rather clever effort to use Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as a ploy in his campaign to get Reagan to scrap Star Wars, and for a few days it looked as though he had succeeded. Under BBC questioning, she was maneuvered into saying, "I think one does not want to go into a higher and higher level of armaments."

When Mrs. Thatcher got to Washington, D.C., the Reagan Administration explained to her that Star Wars does not raise armaments to a "higher level" because it is purely defensive and nonthreatening. She then "clarified" her previous statement and said that there are "no differences" on Star Wars between Britain and the United States.

Even if we believe that the likelihood of a planned nuclear attack by the U.S.S.R. is remote, the chance that someone would fire a single missile, with an atomic bomb in its nose, increases daily because of three reasons: the possibility of an accidental launch because of the sheer number of missiles and increased chance of human error or technical failure; terrorist attack (by suicide leaders such as those who drove a truckload of high explosives into a building); and the unpredictable motives and calculations of Third World nuclear countries.

No arms control treaty negotiated with the Soviet Union could ever protect us from those dangers. But Star Wars (otherwise known as High Frontier) could.