Reagan was Right; We Need an ABM Defense

by Phyllis Schlafly July 12, 2006

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North Korea's threat to test a long-range ballistic nuclear missile capable of reaching the United States comes as no surprise. President Bush already branded North Korea as part of the "axis of evil."

This North Korean threat dramatically confirms the need for the anti-missile defense system that President Ronald Reagan called for in his famous nationally televised address of March 23, 1983. At the time Reagan made that landmark speech, our national strategy for dealing with the Soviet nuclear threat was called Mutual Assured Destruction, known by its acronym MAD.

Reagan and most conservatives believed it was, indeed, MAD to continue with a plan that simply threatened the Russians that if they bombed the United States, we would bomb them back and kill millions of Russians. We had no Plan B.

President Reagan exposed the fallacy in MAD when he posed the crucial question, "Would it not be better to save lives than to avenge them?" Reagan had no qualms about criticizing the mistaken policies of his predecessors.

Ted Kennedy and the anti-defense claque (chanting on cue like a Greek chorus) ridiculed Reagan's plan as Star Wars, but Reagan's vision was accurate and his goal was and is essential. That was the start of our anti-ballistic-missile defense, known as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

We now know that President Reagan's determination to build a U.S. anti-missile system, which he staunchly defended at the Summits of Geneva and Reykjavik, was the fundamental reason he won the Cold War without firing a shot. Mikhail Gorbachev realized the Soviets could not compete with the United States, and that started the collapse of the Soviet empire.

For nearly 30 years, the United States was handicapped from going forward with Reagan's SDI by the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty that had been so foolishly negotiated by Henry Kissinger and signed by President Richard Nixon. If we had had a Supreme Court as eager to cut back on presidential power as we had in the recent Hamdan case, the ABM Treaty could have been ruled unconstitutional because it violated our government's constitutional duty to "provide for the common defense."

President Bush understood this and, in one of his most important acts, in December 2001 he withdrew from the ABM Treaty. He ignored noisy objections from Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The liberals have nevertheless kept up their opposition to deploying an effective ABM defense. They pretend to be worried about the cost (although they are never deterred by the high cost of government programs they like), and budget requests for missile defense funds were cut in half during the Clinton Administrations.

The liberals' other argument is that an ABM system won't work. We need the American can-do attitude expressed in the World War II slogan: The difficult we do today; the impossible may take a little longer.

The Bush Administration has moved steadily to build several methods of defense against both short-range and long-range missiles and many tests have been successful. However, we still have no capability of destroying an ICBM in its boost phase.

A functioning ABM system may be even more necessary in the post 9/11 world than in Reagan's world. In 1983 the terrible nukes could be built only by superpowers with a sophisticated technological base, but today we are in an era of rogue nations with irrational dictators and poor man's missiles that can be built and launched relatively inexpensively, and might even be bought from cash-hungry Russians who still have 3,500 long-range missiles and up to 15,000 smaller tactical nuclear weapons.

In addition to facing down intimidation from North Korea and Iran, we need anti-missile defenses because China is using the huge amounts of cash is gets from U.S. trade to modernize its ballistic missile arsenal. We live in a dangerous world, and there is no excuse for our government not building the best defenses we can in order to save American lives.

If we shoot down a North Korean missile with our own anti-missile system, that would send a powerful message to North Korea that its tactics are a loser. It would also reassure Japan and other U.S. allies that we have the will to protect them from rogue madmen.

The best way to discourage nuclear proliferators would be to demonstrate that the United States is willing and able to destroy their missiles before they hit their targets. It's time for the United States to let the world know that we have an anti-ballistic missile defense system to protect our people and our allies, and that we will use it.