New Proof of Reagan's Wisdom

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The U.S. Navy gave Ronald Reagan a dramatic 25th anniversary gift on February 21. A Navy missile raced into outer space and destroyed an orbiting satellite, thereby providing new proof of the vision President Reagan proclaimed in his then-sensational televised address on March 23, 1983.

While the Navy SM-3 missile didn't knock down an incoming nuclear missile, the direct hit on a satellite proved again that our anti-missile technology is mature and reliable, and that an effective anti-missile system is within our grasp. Traveling at 6,000 miles per hour after being launched from a cruiser in the Pacific, the SM-3 missile was even more accurate than anyone had predicted because it struck precisely at the satellite's dangerous fuel tank.

The successful kill of the satellite also confirmed the ability of the SM-3 to intercept at a higher elevation than had ever been tested before. It revalidated the Bush Administration's expenditure of $10 billion a year on anti-missile defenses.

This direct hit comes on the heels of a particularly impressive track record of successful anti-missile tests in 2007. Since 2005, the Missile Defense Agency has scored 21 successful space interceptions in 22 tests.

The so-called world community, egged on by U.S. pacifists and disarmament professionals, grumbled and sputtered because the United States dared to knock out a satellite. Actually, there was a very persuasive reason for our government to take immediate action against this particular satellite.

It had failed in its mission and was edging closer to Earth carrying a large tank of toxic fuel that would be harmful to many people if it crashed into a populated area. Our government acted properly to protect the world against such an unnecessary disaster.

This demonstration of U.S. anti-satellite capability also had a useful side effect. It signaled Communist China that we have anti-satellite technology and power.

China shocked the world on January 11, 2007 by conducting the first successful test of an anti-satellite weapon. In its usual disregard for the health of humankind, China's test left 2,500 pieces of debris in space spread out in a way that poses a danger to manned and unmanned spacecraft.

U.S. officials recognized China's action as a new strategic threat. Killing a communications satellite could knock out U.S. military and civilian communications systems.

In his 1983 address, Reagan announced that he was "launching an effort which holds the promise of changing the course of human history." Indeed, it did. His speech extricated America from the defeatist McNamara-Kissinger-Nixon-Ford-Carter strategy of Mutual Assured Destruction, known descriptively by its acronym MAD.

The MAD strategy postulated that our only hope of avoiding nuclear war was by threatening massive retaliation and killing as many enemy people as we could. "Morning-in-America" Reagan offered the contrary vision of hope.

"Wouldn't it be better to save lives than to avenge them?" he said. "What if we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?"

Reagan thus added the necessary fourth leg to his strategy of Peace Through Strength. It encompassed not only diplomacy, deterrence and offensive weapons, but also defensive weapons.

This made eminently good sense to the American people, who fully understand that battle requires both a sword and a shield. Conservatives had been pleading for an anti-missile defense system for more than 20 years.

The whole disarmament/pacifist crowd attacked Reagan unmercifully for his determination to defend America with defensive as well as offensive weapons. Ted Kennedy led the pack by ridiculing Reagan's plan as Star Wars.

Reagan's opponents criticized him on every front, claiming an anti-missile system can't work because it requires hitting a bullet with a bullet. This new test should finally put to rest the false claims that it won't work.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we know that it was Reagan's determination to push forward with what became known as his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) that won the Cold War. SDI was the centerpiece of his strategy.

At the Geneva and Reykjavik Summits, Mikhail Gorbachev offered every carrot and stick in his arsenal to persuade or intimidate Reagan into abandoning SDI. When Reagan refused, Gorbachev realized the jig was up for the Soviet empire and its delusions of world conquest because the Soviets could not compete with the U.S. military-economic powerhouse.

Reagan's SDI, so courageously proposed in 1983, ultimately enabled him to defeat the Evil Empire without firing a shot. We know the system works, and it's just as necessary in the post-9/11 world as in the days of the Soviet threat.