PS for 10/12/89

Bush's Challenge on SDI

"The reports of my death," said Mark Twain, "are greatly exaggerated." We need President Bush to proclaim a similar Mark Twainism about the so-called "death" of SDI, which is so gleefully reported by the press at every opportunity.

Ever since 1985, the Soviets have harangued that they would not consider an arms control treaty unless we first cancelled SDI. When the Soviets dropped their anti-SDI demand last week, the headlines should have trumpeted the good news that Reagan and Bush have been totally vindicated in standing firm on SDI, but instead, the media administered the last rites.

Candidate George Bush in 1988 pledged his support for SDI and his commitment to deploy it "when it is ready." He also promised to keep SDI research and testing on track so that he would be able to make a well-informed decision about deployment before the end of his first term.

When President Bush presented his first budget, among other cuts in defense he sliced $1 billion off President Reagan's last SDI budget figure. That 15 percent cut left SDI with the bare-bones minimum needed to continue the testing necessary to make a sound deployment decision.

The liberal Democrats in Congress have been slashing SDI funding further and would like to kill SDI altogether, first because they always prefer to cut defense in order to sweeten up domestic social spending, and second because they think that killing SDI would cripple Bush politically, both domestically and internationally, as indeed it would.

Of all the dozens of foreign and domestic programs and policies endorsed in the Republican Platform, it is doubtful that any enjoys such widespread support as SDI. A failure on the part of President Bush to exert his full leadership capabilities in behalf of SDI would dishearten his supporters and erode the enthusiasm he will need for reelection in 1992.

One of the best kept secrets from the American people is the fact that Soviets's own SDI is more advanced and more costly than ours, and has been going on far longer. They are far ahead of us in the potential to break quickly out of the 1972

ABM Treaty, all the while demanding that the United States adhere to a strict interpretation of that treaty.

The American people need to hear from George read-my-lips Bush the truth that America needs SDI to protect us against an accidental, unauthorized Soviet or terrorist missile launch from anywhere in the world. Our present defenselessness leaves our President with no option except massive retaliation or surrender.

SDI is also needed as insurance against Soviet cheating or sudden breakout from any START treaty. It is unlikely that we will be able to verify Soviet compliance, even if they agree to go through the motions of verification.

Terrorist attacks by irrational foreign governments and groups are an unhappy fact of life in our times. We can't assume that people who have no compunction about planting a bomb on a civilian airliner to kill hundreds would shrink from planting a nuclear bomb to kill thousands.

The day is approaching when technology will make nuclear weapons practical for terrorists to use. They also can use economical chemical weapons and, even if Bush and Gorbachev agree to ban them, terrorists are not parties to that agreement.

President Bush correctly assessed the mood of America in sticking by his "no tax increase" pledge and ignoring the demands of the liberal Democrats to renege on it. That's why his popularity is at an all-time high and the liberal spenders are in disarray.

He did likewise on the Flag issue and on the capital gains tax cut issue. Unfortunately, he has so far failed to send a similar clearcut message on SDI.

If he doesn't send such an SDI message soon, including a credible veto threat, the danger is not only that the aggressive anti-defense liberals will walk over him, but that he will fritter away his own base of political support. SDI is even more of a guy issue among Bush's core supporters than taxes, capital gains, or Flag desecration.

Ronald Reagan was the Great Communicator of a vision of a conservative, principled, and fully defended America. But George Bush, the World War II combat pilot, could easily be a Greater Communicator on the nitty gritty of exactly what it takes to defend American in a dangerous world.

He needs to lay out a coordinated communications strategy, with all his Cabinet, national security, and public relations appointees cooperating. Obviously he knows how to do this: He just did exactly that on his plan to promote parental choice in public schools.