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SDI: Searching for Its Identity

Well, we've finally persuaded the media to use President Reagan's label "SDI" (Strategic Defense Initiative) for his plan to make nuclear weapons obsolete, instead of the media label "Star Wars." But the issue has now become not the name but the substance. We've got it named, all right, but what is it?

That may sound like a silly question, but it is the most important question about SDI. We know we need it, we know it will work, we know we can afford it, and we know we can't afford NOT to have it because the Soviets will soon have theirs.

But what is it? Is it science research on a laser or particle beam system that needs years of development and testing and cannot be operational until the mid to late 1990s?

Or is it a non-nuclear system, whose technology is already developed and tested, and is almost ready for deployment? To be deployed or not to be deployed, as Hamlet would say, that's the question.

The reason SDI is searching for its identity is that President Reagan and other SDI advocates have made their case so persuasively that all but a handful of Congressmen want to be perceived by their constituents as pro-SDI. Even liberals and accommodationists find it impolitic to argue against SDI, so they have devised more devious methods of opposing it.

Before and during the Geneva Summit last November, the principal push by the anti-SDIers was to urge Reagan to "use SDI as a bargaining chip." That ploy failed; the President didn't fall for it.

This year, the anti-SDI agitators have a new game plan. They say, "We love SDI, but we want to research it to death." That would make SDI just a delectable morsel of pork barrel for the scientific community, and for the Congressional districts that enjoy the expenditure of funds. But that would not give America a defensive system.

Of course these anti-SDIers don't say "research SDI to death." They just say, "SDI needs at least ten more years of research, so meanwhile let's extend the MAD ABM Treaty of

1972. This will promote 'arms control' and it won't hurt us because SDI isn't ready to build anyway."

A smart lawyer once said, "I can win any case if you let me ask the question to be decided." Likewise, the fate of SDI depends on who defines it.

The anti-SDIers are trying to define SDI as an exotic laser system, not yet developed, that will not be deployable for 15 to 20 years. The pro-SDIers define SDI as the non-nuclear "smart rock" technology that is already tried-and-tested and could be in place and protecting America within five years.

A "smart rock" is a little piece of metal with a computer brain and a heat-sensitive device. It's like the heat-seeking missiles we routinely use for air defense except that the smart rock is mounted on rockets that can go several hundred miles out into space.

This kind of smart bullet was successfully tested against a U.S. Minuteman warhead on June 10, 1984. It scored a bull's eye at a height of 100 miles, traveling at 20,000 miles per hour. Later tests were successful at heights of hundreds of miles.

Since America desperately needs life insurance against an accidental or deliberate nuclear attack, we should start immediately to put smart bullets on small rockets launched from the ground. A space-based system is essential, too, and by the 1990s, when technology has improved, smart bullets should be deployed on satellites orbiting the earth.

Of course, science advances, technology improves, and the lead time on sophisticated systems keeps lengthening. We should always keep researching so we will have the best system 5, 10 and 15 years into the future.

But we also need protection for the here and now. As SDI Congressional leaders Senator Malcolm Wallop and Rep. Jack Kemp wrote the President, to defer deployment of American defenses for five to seven years "would place the United States in a no-win position and the Russians in a no-lose position."

The Soviets blamed the Chernobyl disaster on human error. We can't afford to allow the American people to be the victims of a Soviet human error about nuclear missiles.

SDI can defend us from a military Chernobyl as well as from a deliberate attack. But SDI can defend us only if it is deployed and ready for action; it cannot defend us at all if it is on the drawing board scheduled for production in the next century.