

“What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter...attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?”

Exactly 20 years ago today, President Reagan posed this intriguing question. His goal was to end America’s vulnerability to ballistic missile attack by launching a program named the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

President Reagan was probably the only man with the ability to propose SDI. Even though his vision was based on realism about the threat facing America—at that time the Soviet Union’s nuclear arsenal—it was balanced by hope and great foresight.

His vision soon will be realized. The Bush administration plans to field a limited ballistic

· SDI is based on conservative principles. In foreign policy, conservatism stands for American strength, leadership, and moral confidence. SDI represents all of those. It was originally a way to become stronger than the Soviet Union, encourage others to stand up to Soviet threats, and reassure Americans and others around the world that our cause in countering the Soviet Union was just. President Reagan’s SDI proposal allowed no room for arguments of moral equivalency between the United States and the Soviet Union.

· SDI is a big and powerful idea. Enduring policies are not based on narrow or small-minded ideas. SDI was a big concept that became one of the chief means for confronting and defeating the Soviet threat. Today it remains critical, as a means of countering the threat posed by rogue states

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# PRESIDENT REAGAN AND MISSILE DEFENSE: THE REALIZATION OF A VISION

*by Baker Spring*

missile defense system in late 2004 and 2005. The system will become operational despite intense opposition over the past two decades in Congress and in the executive branch during the Clinton administration.

Why has SDI survived, and even thrived? Here are some of the reasons President Reagan’s vision has proven so compelling and enduring:

· SDI is based on common sense. The simple premise behind SDI is that America ought to be able to defend itself against attack—and, because it possesses this ability, perhaps even prevent one—instead of simply responding to a successful attack.

· SDI’s grounding in self-defense is why the idea is nearing realization 20 years later, even though the world is a dramatically different place than it was in 1983.

and terrorists. President Reagan had the vision to propose an initiative as far-reaching and flexible as SDI. He focused on getting a handful of big, important things done rather than spreading his efforts over a broad array of narrow initiatives designed to please special interests as President Clinton so often did. This is why history will judge Reagan as a conservative Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Clinton as a liberal Warren G. Harding.

· The SDI message is hopeful and uplifting. President Reagan was an optimistic leader. He viewed missile defense as a way to brighten a world that lived under the darkness caused by the threat of nuclear annihilation. It’s not surprising the American people found comfort and hope in this message.

President Reagan demonstrated the courage of his convictions. It’s impossible to imagine

"I'VE SPOKEN OF THE SHINING CITY [ON A HILL] ALL MY POLITICAL LIFE, BUT I DON'T KNOW IF I EVER QUITE COMMUNICATED WHAT I SAW WHEN I SAID IT....IN MY MIND IT WAS A TALL, PROUD CITY BUILT ON ROCKS STRONGER THAN OCEANS, WINDSWEPT, GOD-BLESSED, AND TEEMING WITH PEOPLE OF ALL KINDS LIVING IN HARMONY AND PEACE; A CITY WITH FREE PORTS THAT HUMMED WITH COMMERCE AND CREATIVITY. AND IF THERE HAD TO BE CITY WALLS, THE WALLS HAD DOORS AND THE DOORS WERE OPEN TO ANYONE WITH THE WILL AND THE HEART TO GET THERE. THAT'S HOW I SAW IT, AND SEE IT STILL."

—RONALD REAGAN, FAREWELL ADDRESS TO THE NATION, JANUARY 11, 1989

the pressure President Reagan was under at the legendary 1986 Reykjavik summit with Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev. Secretary Gorbachev offered to eliminate nuclear weapons in exchange for the termination of the SDI program. How many Presidents could have turned that down?

Yet by rejecting the disingenuous Soviet offer, President Reagan underlined the importance of SDI. That's why, 20 years later, SDI is close to fruition while the USSR is dead and buried.

President Clinton, by contrast, opposed missile defense as fervently as President Reagan supported it. Crucial research was scaled back severely or canceled outright during the 1990s. Yet when Congress passed the National Missile Defense Act of 1999, which established in law the policy of deploying a missile-defense system, Clinton chose to sign the bill—assuring that President Reagan's vision would survive after all.

President Reagan's idea strengthened our national security and that of our allies by overcoming the Soviet threat. President Bush is likewise demonstrating strong leadership by taking an idea born during the Cold War and using it to defend America against today's terrorists and rogue states. That's why it is appropriate to mark the anniversary of President Reagan's 1983 speech—and to realize how crucial it is to take the few steps that remain to make SDI a reality.

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