

Remembering Reagan and SDI

Peter Westwick's interesting feature article "The Strategic Offense Initiative? The Soviets and Star Wars" (PHYSICS TODAY, June 2008, page 43) stimulated a few memories that may add to the history he partially documents. I was a US senator from New Mexico in 1977–82 and thus had some direct involvement in events leading up to President Ronald Reagan's March 1983 announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

In 1979 and 1980, I had become increasingly interested in the potential of providing the US with a defense against ballistic missiles to counter the known Soviet efforts to construct high-powered ground-based lasers as well as a national infrastructure that could survive in the event of a nuclear exchange. In the course of my reading on the subject, I ran across an article in a November 1979 *New Yorker* by my then colleague, the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan.¹ Moynihan cited separately published arguments by Andrei Sakharov and Freeman Dyson against the existing doctrine of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and in favor of mutually assured protection. Moynihan found the Sakharov–Dyson arguments persuasive and added a few favorable ones of his own.

Having discovered our joint interest in strategic defense, Moynihan and I decided that we would sponsor a floor discussion during the Senate Morning Hour when the Democratic and Republican leadership made time available for presentations by individual senators.

He agreed, and we sent our colleagues an invitation to join us at a specific time and day for that purpose. Unfortunately, no one showed up for our discussion except the two of us.

Possibly stimulated by reports of this attempt and other statements I had made on the subject and related technology matters, President-elect Reagan asked me to discuss the subject with him in December 1980. At that meeting, Reagan showed both a deep concern and a deep knowledge about the absence of any means to protect the US from an actual missile attack. He said that the continued production and deployment of weapons of mass destruction could not preserve the peace indefinitely and that we should search for defensive alternatives. He asked what I thought of the feasibility of Edward Teller's suggestion that space-based lasers could ultimately be used to destroy missiles or warheads. I said it then appeared to be technically feasible but would require a great deal of development work once ongoing research indicated which laser candidates were most attractive. In the exchange, I had the impression that Reagan and Teller had discussed the issue long before the 1982 date suggested in Westwick's article. Further archival research may confirm this.

On the question of what Reagan believed relative to defensive versus offensive use of space-based weapons, note his response to a query from Walter Mondale during a presidential debate in 1984. Mondale asked if Reagan was serious about sharing strategic defense technology with the Soviets. Reagan's answer: "Why not?" His response would seem to imply that his focus was purely on missile defense. After participating in the first SDI war game at the Pentagon in 1983, I continued to examine the potential of a shared strategic defense in more detail and concluded that Reagan's intuition on the matter was correct.²

With today's proliferation of missiles by rogue nations, some having a nuclear potential, this may be an even better time for the US, Japan, and Europe to discuss shared strategic defense with Russia, China, and other concerned nations.

References

1. D. P. Moynihan, *New Yorker*, 19 November 1979, p. 104.
2. H. H. Schmitt, *Ann. N. Y. Acad. Sci.* **577**, 245 (1985).

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Westwick replies: I thank Harrison Schmitt for his firsthand knowledge of events. Existing evidence suggests that by 1980 President Ronald Reagan had learned about new concepts for missile defense, including Edward Teller's, from various sources, but that Teller himself was frustrated by his lack of personal access to the president until September 1982. His July 1982 letter was an effort to provide his views. Further research may indeed clarify this chronology.

I agree that Reagan—and most others in the US—viewed the Strategic Defense Initiative as purely defensive, and furthermore that his personal offer to share SDI technology was sincere. My point is that the Soviets did not believe him.

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Scientists protest professor's dismissal

We, the undersigned plasma physicists, are familiar with magnetic mirror research, and we are concerned about the recent actions of the administration of the University of Tsukuba in Japan. Teruji Cho, a professor there, was dismissed from his position as director of the university's plasma research center on 6 March 2008, allegedly for intentionally manipulating experimental data that appeared in *Physical Review Letters*.¹ That publication, in fact, contains results that are extremely interesting and far-reaching in their significance. Cho's team definitively demonstrated that flow shear stabilization can be directly controlled using

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