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Nuclear Abolitionism, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty

How is it that the President who launched the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history and who introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was also the leader who proposed and signed the only treaty to eliminate an entire class of nuclear weapons? To many, the Reagan Administration's military buildup and SDI seem inexplicably at odds with the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. On the one hand, the President introduced massive increases in defense capabilities but, on the other, he called for nuclear disarmament. However, from President Reagan's perspective these policies were perfectly consistent. This chapter examines Reagan's unorthodox views about security, his policy goals, and the intellectual connection between SDI and the reduction of nuclear arsenals. It also considers SDI's role in the conclusion of the landmark INF Treaty.

When President Reagan entered office in January 1981, he announced a massive increase in defense spending. The Administration claimed that the Soviet Union had been engaging in a military buildup during the 1970s and was poised to overtake the U.S. in the arms race. A U.S. buildup was necessary so as to counter increased Soviet strength and global aspirations. Although Reagan was slashing expenditures in most sectors, defense spending would increase by seven per cent per year between 1981 and 1985 and constitute more than 30 per cent of the federal budget. Military expenditures would cost \$1.5 trillion over the next four years, and these resources would be used to strengthen forces, improve combat readiness, and enhance force mobility.¹

In March 1983 Reagan also introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative. SDI was a research program that sought to develop a space-based system of lasers that would destroy Soviet nuclear missiles should they ever be launched in an attack. SDI generated a storm of controversy, not only in the USSR and Western Europe, but in the U.S. as well. Although Reagan portrayed SDI as a defensive system that would protect civilians from a nuclear attack, critics feared it would

1 Reagan's predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had significantly increased defense expenditures before leaving office, rendering Reagan's buildup all the more noteworthy. Richard Halloran, Weinberger Begins Drive for Big Rise in Military Budget, in: *New York Times*, March 5, 1981; Richard Halloran, Reagan to Request \$38B Increase in Military Outlays, in: *New York Times*, March 5, 1981; and Hedrick Smith, US Priorities: Basic Reversal, in: *New York Times*, March 5, 1981.

prompt an arms race in space. Others believed it to be an exorbitant pipe dream, pointing out that the technology for such a system did not exist. Arms control experts claimed that SDI would undermine nuclear security, as enshrined in the doctrine of “Mutual Assured Destruction,” or MAD. The central idea of MAD was that both superpowers would be deterred from launching a nuclear attack on the other by the fact that neither side had defenses. If one side were to attack, the other would retaliate and both would be obliterated. A first strike would prove suicidal, thus deterring a would-be aggressor. Arms control experts insisted that this ever-present prospect of nuclear annihilation had deterred the Soviets from waging war. It was this logic that led the superpowers to sign the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in which they pledged to forego nuclear defenses. Building a defensive system would upend this delicate system of mutual vulnerability.

The military buildup and SDI seemed at odds with the Administration’s “Zero Proposal,” which it introduced in November 1981.² This proposal called for the elimination of all intermediate-range nuclear forces in Europe and later became the basis for the 1987 INF Treaty. At the time it was introduced, however, the Soviets were the only ones with such forces in Europe. The Soviets had deployed SS-20s since 1976 and in response NATO had pledged to deploy similar forces. American Pershing II and Cruise Missiles were scheduled to arrive in Western Europe in late 1983.

To many, the Zero Proposal appeared to be both inequitable and disingenuous. The Reagan Administration was asking the Soviets to dismantle a deployed arsenal while the Americans would simply forego a deployment which was years in the future and which faced increasingly strong resistance from citizens in Western countries.³ Some suspected the Zero Proposal was nothing more than a public relations campaign intended to make the Soviets appear to be the ones opposing arms control. Thus, it came as no surprise when the Kremlin immediately rejected the offer, calling it a “propaganda ploy.”⁴

1. Reagan’s Unconventional Views about Security

In order to appreciate the connection between the military buildup, SDI, and the INF Treaty it is important to understand President Reagan’s views about security, which were unconventional for the time. Simply put, Ronald Reagan abhorred nuclear weapons and sought to eliminate them. He believed nuclear

2 Ronald Reagan, Speech at the National Press Club in Washington on November 18, 1981, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/111881a>.

3 Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy*, New York 1984, pp. 229, 355 f. See also Kenneth Adelman, Interview for the Miller Center of Public Affairs Presidential Oral History Project (2003). Available at <http://millercenter.org/president/reagan/oralhistory/kenneth-adelman>.

4 Reagan’s Arms Proposal Assailed, November 20, 1981, in: *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 33:47, 7.

weapons to be morally repugnant, owing to the fact that they targeted civilians and threatened to destroy civilization. A nuclear war was also unwinnable, Reagan reasoned, owing to the destructive capacity of the weapons. Moreover, the vast stockpiles that had been accumulated during the Cold War raised the probability of a catastrophic accident. “No *one* could win a nuclear war,” Reagan observed in his memoirs. “Yet as long as nuclear weapons were in existence, there would always be risks they would be used, and once the first nuclear weapons was unleashed, who knew where it would end? My dream, then, became a world free of nuclear weapons [... F]or the eight years I was president I never let my dream of a nuclear-free world fade from my mind.”⁵ Martin Anderson, Reagan’s long-time friend and advisor, recalled that “the concern about nuclear war and the challenge to diminish that war was always foremost in [Reagan’s] mind. It was not something he talked about a lot in public. But he had strong feelings and strong convictions about what could and should be done.”⁶

Reagan also rejected the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction. Foregoing defenses defied reason, he believed, and left American citizens vulnerable to nuclear annihilation. Such a policy was unconscionable. “MAD [was] madness,” the President maintained. “It was the craziest thing I ever heard of.” It rendered the world “a button push away from oblivion.”⁷ MAD depended upon the superpowers threatening each other’s survival forever, with no mistakes, no miscommunications, and no technical failures.⁸ Reagan thought such expectations were unreasonably high, and the stakes even higher.

President Reagan rejected traditional approaches to arms control, which sought to limit the rate at which arsenals could continue to grow. Instead, he called for the reduction and eventual elimination of these weapons. During his first press conference in 1981, the President told reporters, “We should start negotiating [with the Soviets] on the basis of trying to effect an actual reduction in the number of nuclear arms. That would then be *real* strategic arms limitation.”⁹ Reagan repeatedly called for the abolition of nuclear weapons, and for him, the Zero Proposal was a first step toward this larger goal.¹⁰ Eliminating INF weapons from Europe would be a positive step in the right direction. “I believe there can only be one policy for preserving our precious civilization in this modern age: a nuclear war can never be won and must never be fought,” the President explained in November 1983. “I know I speak for people everywhere when I say our dream is to see the day when nuclear weapons will be banished from the

5 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, New York 1990, p. 550, see also p. 265.

6 Martin Anderson, *Revolution*, New York 1987, p. 72.

7 Reagan, *An American Life*, pp. 13, 547, 550.

8 Ronald Reagan, Remarks to the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, March 14, 1988. Text of speech is accessible at The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=35547#axzz1nhyn0pZ8>.

9 Ronald Reagan, The President’s News Conference, January 29, 1981, in: *Public Papers of the Presidency*, 1981, pp. 55–62.

10 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life*, pp. 293–297.

earth.”¹¹ By the time he left office Reagan had called for the elimination of nuclear arsenals approximately 150 times.¹²

2. Reagan’s Military Buildup

Reagan’s military buildup was part of his plan to reduce and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons. Administration officials called this policy “peace through strength” and it had three objectives.¹³ The most immediate goal of the buildup was to match Soviet military capabilities. Reagan officials believed that the USSR had been engaged in a military buildup and was about to overtake the United States in the arms race.¹⁴

The second objective was to deter Soviet expansionism. The Administration assumed that the USSR had invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 because Moscow believed the United States was too weak to challenge them. Reagan

11 Ronald Reagan, Address to the Japanese Diet, November 11, 1983; Lou Cannon, President Hails Japan as Partner, in: Washington Post, November 11, 1983.

12 Martin Anderson and Annelise Anderson, Reagan’s Secret War: The Untold Story of his Fight to Save the World from Nuclear Disaster, New York 2009, pp. 93 f.

13 See Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation on Arms Reduction and Deterrence, November 22, 1982, in: Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 18, p. 1519; Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation, March 23, 1983, in: Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 1983, pp. 442–448; Ronald Reagan, The US–Soviet Relationship, January 16, 1984, in: Department of State Bulletin (February 1984), pp. 2–4; Ronald Reagan, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 1984, in: American Foreign Policy Current Documents, Washington, D. C. 1984, pp. 220–227.

14 There were disagreements within the Administration as to whether the U.S. was in the process of falling behind the USSR in the arms race, or already in second place. More importantly, both arguments were wrong. They were based on U.S. intelligence assessments which indicated that the Soviets had been acquiring weapons at an increasingly faster pace during the 1970s. By 1982 the CIA had revised this assessment. New information indicated that Moscow had not been acquiring new weapons at an increasingly faster pace during the 1970s as previously believed. In fact, the growth rate in Soviet military expenditures had peaked in the mid-1970s, and was unlikely to increase in the near future. Nonetheless, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and CIA Director William Casey continued to suggest that the Soviets had been engaged in a threatening buildup. For example, see Soviet Defense Spending: Recent Trends and Future Prospects (written in 1982 but published in July 1983), and CIA, Office of Soviet Analysis, Joint Economic Committee Briefing Paper, September 14, 1983, pp. 8–11, 18. For a discussion about the process of reassessment and its aftermath, see Noel E. Firth and James H. Noren, Soviet Defense Spending: A History of CIA Estimates, 1950–1990, Texas 1998, pp. 75–97; James Noren, CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Economy, in: Gerald K. Haines and Robert E. Legget, Watching the Bear: Essays on CIA’s Analysis of the Soviet Union, Washington, D. C. 2003. Available at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/watching-the-bear-essays-on-cias-analysis-of-the-soviet-union/article02.html>; Raymond L. Garthoff, The Great Transition, Washington, D. C. 1994, pp. 41 f.

officials reasoned that a stronger U.S. would prevent the Soviets from seeking to further expand their sphere of influence.¹⁵

President Reagan's ultimate objective, however, was to persuade the Kremlin to reduce its arsenal. Administration officials assumed that Moscow would only make concessions if confronted by a strong and determined adversary. The U.S. needed to compel the Soviets to agree to arms reductions, these advisors reasoned. Thus, their strategy was to increase U.S. military capabilities so as to convince the Kremlin to enter into arms reductions talks.¹⁶ The buildup was meant to bring about a decrease in superpower arsenals.

President Reagan explained his reasoning in 1982. "Some may question what modernizing our military has to do with peace," he acknowledged. "[A] secure force keeps others from threatening us, and that keeps the peace. And just as important, it also increases the prospects of reaching significant arms reductions with the Soviets, and that's what we really want. The United States wants deep cuts in the world's arsenal of weapons, but unless we demonstrate the will to rebuild our strength and restore the military balance, the Soviets, since they're so far ahead, have little incentive to negotiate with us. Let me repeat the point because it goes to the heart of our policies. Unless we demonstrate the will to rebuild our strength, the Soviets have little incentive to negotiate."¹⁷ Although it seemed paradoxical, Reagan hoped the buildup would ultimately lead to arms reductions.

3. SDI and the Elimination of Nuclear Weapons

SDI was another critical component of Reagan's quest to eliminate nuclear weapons. The President reasoned that even if nuclear arsenals were reduced by 90 per cent the world would not be truly secure. "Peace" would still be achieved through the on-going threat of nuclear annihilation. Defenses were necessary to protect citizens from both accidental and intentional attacks. "Every offensive weapon ever invented by man has resulted in the creation of a defense against it," he observed. "[Wasn't] it possible in this age of technology that we could invent a defensive weapon that could intercept nuclear weapons and destroy them as they emerged from their silos?"¹⁸

15 This assumption was incorrect. The Kremlin decision to send armed forces to Afghanistan was based on a perceived need to support an ideological ally. Members of the Politburo were somewhat reluctant about the mission and within a month were looking for a face-saving way out.

16 These assumptions were incorrect. For a variety of military, strategic, and financial reasons, the Kremlin favored an end to the arms race.

17 Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation on Arms Reduction and Deterrence, November 22, 1982, in: Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents 18, p. 1519.

18 Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 547.

When Reagan unveiled SDI in March 1983 he explained, “I’ve become more and more deeply convinced that the human spirit must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence. Wouldn’t it be better to save lives than to avenge them? [...] 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 a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies. [...]”¹⁹

Moreover, Reagan believed that an effective defensive system could pave the way for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. If the United States could defend itself from a nuclear attack, Soviet nuclear arsenals would be rendered useless, he reasoned. And if both the U.S. and the USSR had effective defenses, the weapons would become obsolete. Thus, they could be abolished. Consequently, the President repeatedly offered to share SDI technology with the Soviets. If both superpowers could defend themselves against a nuclear attack, Reagan explained to General Secretary Gorbachev, retaining such arsenals would be pointless. Thus, from the outset the President offered to share SDI technology with the Soviets.²⁰ During the Geneva Summit and the Reyjavik meeting, as well as in letters to Soviet leaders, the President repeatedly offered to share SDI technology so as to pave the way for the elimination of nuclear weapons.

In short, from President Reagan’s perspective the U.S. military buildup, SDI, and the INF Treaty were all part and parcel of the same quest to abolish nuclear weapons. The U.S. buildup would persuade the Soviets to agree to arms reductions, SDI would render nuclear weapons impotent, and the Treaty would be the first step toward abolishing superpower arsenals. In Reagan’s mind there were no contradictions whatsoever.

4. Rifts Between the President and His Advisors

For the most part, Reagan’s advisors did not share his unorthodox views about security. For one thing, they opposed the abolition of nuclear weapons. The experts believed that nuclear weapons had successfully deterred the Soviet Union from initiating a war with the West and expanding its empire. If the weapons were removed Moscow would embark on a series of military adventures intended to fulfill its territorial ambitions.

19 Ronald Reagan, Address, March 23, 1983, in: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Ronald Reagan, 1983*, Washington, D. C. 1984, pp. 442 f.

20 For example, see Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters, March 29, 1983, in: *Public Papers of the President, 1983*, pp. 463–470; and the transcripts from NSC meetings in: Jason Saltoun-Ebin (ed.), *The Reagan Files: The Untold Story of Reagan’s Top-Secret Efforts to Win the Cold War*, Pacific Palisades, CA 2010, pp. 349–422.

Reagan's advisors also supported MAD, claiming that this arrangement had kept the peace since the end of World War Two. Secretary of State Alexander Haig wrestled with the President over this issue in 1981. As Haig tells it, during a visit to Camp David, Reagan had drafted a personal letter to the Soviet General Secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, which expressed his hope for "meaningful dialogue" and ultimately, the abolition of nuclear weapons. "[When I read it] I found myself astonished at his attitude when I measured it against the backdrop of what he was saying publicly and what was attributed to him as a classic cold warrior," Haig told Reagan biographer, Lou Cannon. The letter "talked about a world without nuclear weapons, it talked about disarmament. [...] It reflected a demeanor that if only those two men could sit down as rational human beings, the problems of the world would be behind us." Haig considered the letter "naïve," so he strongly advised against sending it. Reagan ultimately agreed not to send the letter, but he did not change his views about MAD or the need to abolish nuclear weapons.²¹

Haig's successor, George Shultz, found himself waging the same ideological battle. Shultz, who was normally quite deferential, repeatedly tried to persuade Reagan to support MAD. In late 1983 he prepared a paper for the President outlining the reasons to stick with the doctrine. "But I made little real impact on the president," he conceded. "He stuck with his own deeply held view of where we should be heading."²²

Most of Reagan's advisors also opposed the Strategic Defense Initiative. SDI had been the President's pet project. The development of the initial concept, along with the speech unveiling the program, had been conducted in secret. Reagan had wanted to ensure that his idea did not fall victim to bureaucratic battles or naysayers. Thus, neither the Secretary of State nor the Secretary of Defense was part of the venture. The normally placid Shultz was incensed when he learned of the program—two days before it was publicly unveiled. Assistant Secretary of State Richard Burt was "flabbergasted."²³ Both men, along with National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane, vehemently argued against the project. The program would be perceived as destabilizing and undermine Western security, they argued. The technology did not exist, the costs would prove exorbitant, and the program would cause serious rifts with Allies.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger was the only senior advisor who backed SDI enthusiastically. Like Reagan, he believed the mutual vulnerability enshrined in MAD was nonsensical and thought defenses against Soviet nuclear missiles would be a positive step forward. The \$26 billion flooding into his department was also a plus.²⁴

21 Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, New York 1991, p. 301.

22 George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, New York 1993, pp. 466, 509.

23 For more on the Reagan Administration officials' reactions to SDI and the ensuing internal battles see *ibid.*, pp. 246–264; Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon*, New York 1990, pp. 291–329; and Martin Anderson, *Revolution*, pp. 80–99.

24 Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, pp. 291–329.

After repeatedly trying to talk the President out of the SDI program, Reagan's advisors grudgingly came to accept it. Reagan was so enamored of the idea that they had little choice but to go along. Moreover, McFarlane and others came to believe that it could be a useful bargaining chip for extracting arms control concessions out of the Soviet Union. SDI could be traded away in exchange for a Soviet pledge to reduce its nuclear arsenals, these advisors reasoned.²⁵

But Reagan's advisors emphatically opposed his idea of sharing SDI technology with the Soviets. They repeatedly beseeched the President to stop making such offers. The plan was not only untenable, they argued: sharing SDI would constitute the largest transfer of Western technology during the Cold War. Washington would be giving away its most valuable advantage over the Soviets. As Weinberger advised Reagan in February 1987, the idea of sharing SDI "scared the pants off" some of his officials, including the Defense Secretary himself.²⁶ "President Reagan was not only a true believer in SDI, he was definitely a true believer in sharing," Jack Matlock, the Soviet expert on the National Security Council at the time explained in 1993. "[T]his was something that most of the bureaucracy, virtually the entire bureaucracy [...] said we can't do."²⁷ Frank Carlucci, who served as both Reagan's National Security Advisor and Secretary of Defense recalls, "[The President] did, as best I could tell, sincerely believe that he could give [SDI] to the Russians and everything would be fine. And I and others tried to explain to him that technically that just was not feasible. And the only thing that finally convinced him, I remember [was] one day I said to him, 'Mr. President, you have just got to stop saying that because Gorbachev, among others, doesn't believe you.' And he said, 'Well, I guess you are right. He really doesn't believe me.' [...] But it took a number of years to get him to that realization."²⁸

25 Robert McFarlane, *Consider What Star Wars Accomplished*, in: *New York Times*, August 24, 1993; McFarlane's remarks, in: Nina Tannenwald (ed.), *Understanding the End of the Cold War 1980–1987*, oral history conference at Brown University 7–10 May 1998 (provisional transcript 1999), pp. 47 f., henceforth 'Brown Conference'. See also the memo from Thomas Thorne, INR to Secretary Shultz, July 26, 1985, in: Tannenwald (ed.), *Brown Conference*. On the views Reagan's officials held on SDI see Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, New York 2005, especially pp. 145–170. Reagan never saw SDI as a bargaining chip, however, and was adamant that it should not be treated as such.

26 NSC Meeting, February 10, 1987, transcript in: Saltoun-Ebin, *The Reagan Files*, p. 370.

27 Jack Matlock's remarks, in: *A Retrospective on the End of the Cold War*, oral history conference sponsored by The Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, February 26–7, 1993, Session II, pp. 81 f., henceforth "Princeton Conference".

28 Carlucci's remarks, in: *Princeton Conference*, Session II, p. 54.

5. SDI and the INF Treaty

From President Reagan's perspective SDI and the INF Treaty were perfectly consistent. SDI would protect civilians from an intentional or accidental nuclear attack while the superpowers began the process of reducing their arsenals. And if both the U. S. and the USSR could build effective defenses, nuclear weapons would become useless, thus enabling them to be abolished. SDI and the INF Treaty would both facilitate the abolition of nuclear arsenals.

But, as Reagan's advisors anticipated, others had a different view. The Soviets found the two programs to be at odds. Reagan repeatedly called for the elimination of nuclear weapons yet he launched a military buildup and introduced what they called "space weapons." From Moscow's perspective SDI threatened to extend the arms race to space. If effective, it would enable the U.S. to attack the USSR without fear of a reprisal, thus upending the fragile peace between the superpowers. At the very least SDI contravened the 1972 ABM Treaty.

While the Soviets were initially troubled about SDI these concerns dissipated as military scientists studied the matter.²⁹ In the late 1970s the Soviets had considered launching a similar research program of their own and were consequently deeply familiar with the technical challenges of building a space-based defensive system.³⁰ This expertise enabled them to conclude that it was unlikely SDI would come to fruition any time soon. Experts advised the Kremlin that the Soviet Union should not invest resources trying to match SDI. If the system was ever built and deployed—and this was a big "if"—the Soviet Union could build inexpensive countermeasures that would overwhelm it.³¹ By the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 Soviet officials had begun to suspect that SDI was a ruse intended to lure the Soviets into wasting their resources on a comparable project, or perhaps a bargaining chip that Reagan would offer to trade away in exchange for Soviet pledges to reduce their arsenal.³²

29 Vladimir Slipchenko, in: Tannenwald (ed.), *Brown Conference*, pp. 51–54; Aleksander Bessmertnykh, in: *Princeton Conference*, 1993, pp. 22–24. Yuri Andropov interview in: *Pravda*, March 26, 1983.

30 In 1978 Soviet military scientist Vladimir Chelomei had proposed the construction of small space shuttles that would carry anti-satellite weapons into space. Like SDI, Chelomei's proposal envisioned a space-based system of lasers capable of destroying incoming missiles. A key difference, however, was that President Reagan envisioned a purely defensive system, whereas the Soviet proposal included the ability to attack enemy satellites. See Steven J. Zagola, *Red Star Wars*, in: *Jane's Intelligence Review* 9/5 (May 1, 1997), pp. 205–208; David E. Hoffman, *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and its Dangerous Legacy*, New York 2009, pp. 215–218; Roald Z. Sagdeev, *The Making of a Soviet Scientist*, New York 1994, especially pp. 96, 99, 123–124, and 202–211; and Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces*, Ithaca, NY 1999, pp. 233–248.

31 Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces*, p. 239.

32 Alexander Yakovlev, as cited in Frances FitzGerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, New York 2000, p. 411. Oleg Grinevsky relates that Marshall Akhromeev called SDI "a chimera." See

Like Reagan, Gorbachev abhorred nuclear weapons, and for a variety of strategic, military, and financial reasons, the Politburo sought to end the arms race. But SDI made it more difficult to do so. Soviet conservatives claimed that Reagan was launching a new arms race in space and therefore resisted arms reductions. The more belligerent Reagan seemed, the more these Soviet hard-liners resisted Gorbachev's reforms.

Gorbachev therefore sought to counter SDI in the most cost-effective manner possible: through diplomatic pressure. The Soviet leader tried to persuade Reagan to abandon SDI, or at the very least, to restrict it to the laboratory. Gorbachev reasoned that if he could get such assurances from the President, he could proceed with his main task, which was to end the arms race and eliminate nuclear weapons. Gorbachev's strategy was to link SDI with arms reductions. The Soviets would agree to reduce their nuclear arms, he explained, if the President would forego SDI. In letter after letter and meeting after meeting Gorbachev tried to sell Reagan this "package."

But Reagan refused to budge. SDI was not a bargaining chip, he insisted. It was a means to protect civilians from nuclear Armageddon. The President thought it would be unconscionable to trade such protection away.

Thus, the Strategic Defense Initiative stymied progress on the reduction of nuclear arsenals. The stand-off over SDI slowed progress on the conclusion of the INF Treaty. Both leaders bear the blame for this situation. Reagan's initially belligerent rhetoric, combined with the military buildup and SDI, undermined his quest to abolish nuclear weapons. From Moscow's perspective, launching a new weapons system while calling for the elimination of nuclear arms seemed contradictory. The Soviet camp questioned Reagan's sincerity about both nuclear abolition and the objectives of SDI. The President also undermined progress on arms reductions by refusing to agree to restrict SDI to the laboratory, as Gorbachev requested. Realistically, the research program would have remained a laboratory experiment for two decades. As Secretary Shultz later remarked,

Tannenwald (ed.), *Brown Conference*, p. 41. Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *Instructions from the Centre: Top Secret Files on KGB Foreign Operations, 1975–1985*, London 1991, pp. 112, 114, 106–115. Soviet suspicions were not entirely misplaced. In 1993, after an internal investigation, the then Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, confirmed that the United States did indeed have a program aimed at deceiving the Kremlin about SDI. The internal investigation determined that during the 1980s the Pentagon developed a deception program designed "to feed the Kremlin half-truths and lies about the project" and to prevent the Soviet Union from obtaining accurate information about SDI research. See Tim Weiner, *Lies and Rigged 'Star Wars' Test Fooled the Kremlin, and Congress*, in: *The New York Times*, August 18, 1993, p. A6; Tim Weiner, *General Details Altered 'Star Wars' Test*, in: *The New York Times*, August 27, 1993; Eric Schmitt, *Aspin Disputes Report of 'Star Wars' Rigging*, in: *The New York Times*, September 10, 1993; and U.S. General Accounting Office, *Ballistic Missile Defense: Records Indicate Deception Program Did Not Affect 1984 Test Results*, GAO NSIAD-94-219 (July 1994).

agreeing to such a restriction would have been like “giving [Gorbachev] the sleeves from our vest.”³³

But Gorbachev made the tactical error of linking SDI and nuclear arms reduction. Consequently, no progress could be made on reducing nuclear weapons until Reagan conceded on SDI. Linking the issues enabled SDI to become a roadblock.

By 1987 Gorbachev’s advisors were urging him to de-link SDI and nuclear arms reductions. “The package” had backfired. There had been no progress on the main goal—arms reductions—because the process had been held hostage to SDI. The advisors urged him to deal with each issue separately. On February 28, 1987, Gorbachev “untied the package,” announcing that the Soviet Union would be willing to discuss the reduction of nuclear missiles separately from the Strategic Defense Initiative. This led to a major breakthrough and was pivotal in ending the Cold War. Alleviated of the need to find common ground on SDI, the two sides quickly reached an agreement to eliminate intermediate-range forces in Europe. Ten months later Gorbachev and Reagan signed the historic INF Treaty.

6. Conclusion

President Reagan had unconventional views about security which led to policies that could appear to be contradictory. The President’s repeated calls for the elimination of nuclear weapons seemed inconsistent with his military buildup and SDI. Such seeming inconsistencies proved frustratingly perplexing to both Reagan’s advisors and the Soviet leaders. But for Reagan the ultimate goal was the abolition of nuclear weapons. The buildup, SDI, the Zero Proposal, and the INF Treaty were all part of the President’s quest for a more stable system of global security. President Reagan sought to replace mutual assured destruction with mutual assured survival.³⁴ The INF Treaty was meant to be a major step on this journey.

33 George Shultz, Oral History at Miller Center, December 18, 2002, http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2002_1218_shultz.pdf.

34 Reagan, *An American Life*, p. 550.