Guest Column/Alan Sarzawski

SDI is impractical and fatally flawed

Few problems are as troubling and frustrating as the US involvement in the nuclear arms race for the last four decades, through Republican and Democratic administrations alike, the size, sophistication, and cost of the superpowers’ nuclear arsenals have increased steadily. Presently, even a tiny fraction of either side’s arsenal is enough to destroy both the United States and the Soviet Union.

President Reagan appeared before this dastardly backdrop in the spring of 1983 and offered a glimpse of hope: the Strategic Defense Initiative. Rather than build more weapons, he said, we would render nuclear weapons “impotent and useless” by developing a defense against Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM’s).

SDI is promising. To beleaguered citizens it promises hope. It is at last a plan that does not require the cooperation of the Soviets. To military contractors and their__sponsors, SDI promises money. Most defense contractors have already appointed vice presidents in charge of SDI and at worst dangerous.

The Soviet Union regards such 10,000 warheads in a nucle_ attack as a mortal threat. The head of SDI, does not say that a 90 percent reduction in nuclear armaments is possible. One does. And even an SDI system that is 99.9 percent effective will not prevent the destruction of the United States in a nuclear war. Furthermore, SDI is only effective against ICBM’s. The United States would still be vulnerable to attack by submarine-launched missiles and cruise missiles. Even the impossible, a perfect shield against ICBM’s, will not bring the security we yearn for.

But even a 99 percent effective SDI system will not prevent the destruction of the United States. Not only will supercomputers process the data in advance of the attack, the SDI’s software is obviously going to contain serious bugs, and it won’t even be ready for decades. Karshner’s and others concede that even a 50 percent effective SDI system will be impractical, the same people who argue that we need SDI to defend against the aggressive, war-mongering Soviets tacitly assume that the Soviets will do nothing while the United States gains a never-ending technological advantage.

The argument is flawed and a never-ending arms race is the result.

To the Editor: In the October 8th issue of The Tech, two letters urged student action that is opposed to the Strategic Defense Initiative (Pledge against SDI has arrived at MIT and a student group access to it). These people, of course, have the freedom to oppose SDI. Yet, we should be aware that this is what they are doing and more enlightened students and faculty should take note that there are also many who will stand fast and resist any attacks on basic freedoms by the SDI. Most importantly, the Institute itself should take no stand on issues such as the Strategic Defense Initiative and would not selectively deny individuals access to any prospective employer, including the CIA.

However, the undersigned individually have the right to and do make the following political statement: "We urge that research on SDI be vigorously pursued. Research is needed because there are many problems involved in constructing a defense against nuclear weapons. Research is warranted because it is the legitimate concern of government to provide for the common defense.”

One must wonder why people can’t have a peaceful and point out difficulties with a project, then make no mention of prohibit research to resolve these difficulties. This is what research is for. The fight against cancer, the search for viable fusion energy, and many other research goals have huge problems facing them. That is why research institutions, such as MIT, are legitimately offered support to do such research.

One must also stand amazed at the argument that if some facility does research on this subject, it will lend MIT’s name to the pro-SDI cause.

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