Column/David P. Hamilton

SDI lacks clear objectives

The Strategic Defense Initiative is that rare in politics: a program that is all things to all people. President Reagan says it is a defense against the nuclear threat that has dominated the nightmares of the modern age. The Pentagon's nuclear planners envision it as a system to protect the nation's missile force from a surprise attack. Conservative Congressmen foresee the program's massive expenditures as an opportunity for economic war with the Soviet Union.

Is it any wonder that no one knows quite what the program is for?

Furthermore, it's impossible to get a straight answer out of anyone in the Reagan administration. Such nonsense has been said, at various times, that SDI will provide a full population defense, or a "defense against all threats," or a "defense against all threats from rocket-launched missiles," or only a "limited defense" or none at all.

March 22, 1983, the president announced a "soft target" concept that would render nuclear weapons "devoid of absolutes." The plan came as a surprise to many of his administration, including the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had not been consulted prior to the speech.

Reagan was essentially advocating what defense contractors call the "population defense" mission. Unsurprisingly, the defense defense turned out to be extremely popular among the public. By using the word "populace" instead of "missiles," Reagan's SDI promised a technological solution to what is essentially a political problem.

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