

Are Nuclear Defenses Morally Superior?

When President Reagan launched his Strategic Defense Initiative two years ago, he asked the simple rhetorical question: "Wouldn't it be better to save lives than avenge them?" SDI, which proposes to destroy Soviet missiles in flight, packs a powerful *moral* appeal, compared to our traditional policies of deterrence through the threat of assured destruction. For what is more moral than self-defense, less moral than massive retaliation against civilians? I want to argue, however, that enthusiasm for the moral superiority of nuclear defenses is unwarranted. But first I want to take note of three more obviously flawed arguments that have been offered of late on their behalf.

Three Bad Arguments

The first bad argument proceeds by equating the right to bear arms with the right to wear armor. Lewis Lehrman, chairman of Citizens for America, includes in his moral case for SDI the argument that since the American president takes an oath to "preserve, protect, and defend" and individual Americans have a "natural right of self-defense," the pursuit of the Strategic Defense Initiative "would satisfy both the requirements of our Constitution and our consciences." This is merely semantic conjuring, which confuses means with ends. The right to self-defense is the right to take measures toward the end of defending yourself. It in no way follows that defensive measures are the only or the most appropriate means to the end of self-defense. If the right to self-defense had meant the right to adopt strictly defensive measures, we would probably not have the National Rifle Association but the National Bulletproof Vest Association. Obviously, an offensive weapon can be used for defensive purposes, and many of the technologies being developed under SDI can be used in attacking satellites. The real debate, then, is about the relation of means to ends: what purposes is SDI technology intended to serve and what purposes would it in fact serve?

The second bad argument takes the form of a rhetorical question: if SDI is such a bad idea, how come the Soviets are so much against it? There are quite a few difficulties with the general rule of always doing the opposite of what the Soviets say they want. One is that they are well aware of knee-jerk anti-Soviet tendencies and may try to use them. Some Reagan administration officials have defended the current U.S. offensive build-up partly as a good way to cause the Soviets to spend their economy into the ground while

trying to keep ahead of us in offensive systems. Maybe some clever Soviets are hoping we will spend our economy into the ground on defensive systems (plus offensive systems). In any case, we should probably think for ourselves. As President Eisenhower said, "We need only what we need."

The final argument to be set aside is that, after all, the Strategic Defense Initiative is just research—and who can be against research? For a start, we should be clear that the issue is not: research or no research. The choices are: research at public expense now, research at private expense now, or no research now. And the research part of SDI, which is projected to surpass the Apollo program, is research on a vast scale indeed.

Two further considerations seem to me to be decisive. One is momentum. William Burrows commented in *Foreign Affairs* that the program manager is yet to be born who can walk into a room and say, "General, the \$30 billion is all gone now, and we have decided that this initiative was a bad idea, sir." Much more important, the Soviet response will come to the R&D—they are not going to wait and see how the field testing turns out. A major research commitment is a major political act in American/Soviet relations.

The Moral Argument

Let me turn now to the argument that SDI will be morally superior to alternative policies regarding nuclear war. The moral problem to which SDI is proposed as the solution is, quite simply, the unprecedented and literally unimaginable destruction that offensive missiles used in retaliation do themselves and invite in return. The two most obvious ways of avoiding this barbaric devastation are the direct route of the elimination of the offensive missiles themselves and the indirect route of the construction of defenses so effective that they would be the technological equivalent of disarmament.

It is not surprising that the same people who, in the debate over offensive weapons systems, have been proponents of "war-fighting" counterforce weapons and critics of assured destruction are also proponents of SDI. The moral thread in the argument is perfectly consistent: in both cases, the point is to minimize the risk of destruction. The counterforce offensive weapons are supposed to diminish the risk of nuclear war by a reduction in the *magnitude* of destruction through increased accuracy and (allegedly) reduced yields, if deterrence fails, and by a

The Moral Case for Strategic Defense

Colin Gray, President of the National Institute for Public Policy and a leading advocate of strategic defenses, gives the following morally relevant arguments for SDI.

The SDI

- should strengthen deterrence and make war less likely (the SDI attacks Soviet strategy).
- offers the only practical path to very large-scale nuclear disarmament (nuclear offensive forces could be reduced because they will no longer work as reliable instruments of war).
- will be needed to police a disarmament regime.
- should make a truly dramatic difference to the damage that would be suffered should deterrence fail or simply not apply (we should worry more than we do about our "rational actor" model that explains how stable deterrence is).
- should reduce heroically the risk to the environment of a nuclear war (nuclear winter).
- and, finally, has no good alternatives.

reduction in the *probability* that deterrence will fail through their increased effectiveness as deterrents. The first goal, then, is to produce the most moral (or least immoral) possible offensive nuclear weapons. SDI then would simply finish the job and take us completely away from offensive weapons—or anyhow, as far away as we can get.

Now, the difference between "completely away from offensive weapons" and "as far away as we can get" highlights the chief difficulty facing those who want to provide a moral defense for strategic defense. The hope that seems to be winning whatever public support SDI is garnering is that we can move beyond retaliatory deterrence and make offensive weapons impotent and obsolete. The trouble seems to be that SDI would not begin with population defense. The "intermediate deployment" of SDI would be missile defense, designed to enhance, not eliminate, retaliatory deterrence. But as long as SDI enhances the invulnerability of U.S. retaliatory forces, it seems utterly unresponsive to the moral arguments against retaliation. We are keeping the offensive missiles, which are what the moral argument condemns.

However, a rationale for the temporary continuation of reliance on retaliation as a decisive step toward the elimination of retaliation has been given by Keith Payne and Colin Gray in *Foreign Affairs*, as follows. Even if the technology for a population defense were available, we might not want to move directly to it. The construction of a highly effective population defense for the United States would tend to eliminate the Soviet capacity for retaliation (and first strike), which could result in instability as we moved out of the situation in which the Soviet Union could still

retaliate (strike first) into the situation in which it cannot. The Soviet Union, that is, would have an incentive to go ahead and take what might be its very last opportunity for all time to attack. The strongest deterrent to that last-chance attack, until the invulnerable defenses are completed, is the same old deterrent as always: a survivable retaliatory force.

The purpose of missile defenses, then, is, in the persuasive phrase of Payne and Gray, "to guard the transition" to population defenses. The moral position implicit here is this: during the intermediate deployment of missile defenses, SDI will rely no less (and no more) on retaliatory offensive weapons than we do now and so will be no less (and no more) immoral than it is now; however, intermediate deployment is the best means to full deployment, at which point we can satisfy the requirements of morality by eliminating the offensive missiles altogether.

A Skeptic's Reply

Although the rationale of guarding the transition seems the best justification available for continued reliance on offensive missiles, it has its weaknesses. What is to be said about the fact that the means to the end of the elimination of retaliation is the enhancement of retaliation (for an indefinitely long transition period)? A first answer would be, in effect: the end justifies the means. Here we fight fire with fire—we cross beyond retaliation on a bridge of retaliation. But as a defense of the moral superiority of SDI (over alternatives like assured destruction), the argument that this end (eliminating retaliation) justifies the means (enhancing retaliation) faces a dilemma: if it works, it works just as well for assured destruction as for strategic defense; and if it does not work, it does not work.

For both SDI and assured destruction, the fundamental question remains: are there any circumstances under which we intend to retaliate? In both cases, the answer is: yes, if deterrence fails. The defender of SDI can add: yes, if deterrence fails before we have eliminated our offensive missiles, to which we think this is the best means. But the defender of old-fashioned retaliation can add the same vague qualification: advocates of both forms of deterrence quite sincerely hope to get beyond retaliation somehow someday. The simple fact of having a worthy ultimate goal does not, however, deal with the moral problem of what retaliation would entail if it were to be unleashed.

To rid himself of this unwanted parallel with justifications of assured destruction, the advocate of the moral superiority of SDI needs to argue not that the end is so noble or urgent that it justifies the means, but that the connection between the end and *this* means is much tighter than the connection, if any, between the end and alternative means.

Can the advocate of SDI make good on this claim? The thesis that offensive missiles will guard the transition to the defensive revolution raises worries endemic to all transitions: they have a nasty way of

never ending. We need to be given strong grounds for confidence that the offensive missiles will, if not "fade away," somehow or other be negotiated away or go away. Otherwise the moral argument does not work. It is planning to retaliate, not being retaliated against, that just-war morality requires us to eliminate.

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Proponents of SDI have not yet spelled out a convincing account of how or why the transition is going to occur. The contention, for example, that our construction of population defenses will give the Soviets an incentive to switch from offensive missiles to defenses of their own is unpersuasive. Why should they respond to our defenses with defenses rather than with enhanced offenses, which would almost surely be cheaper? In response to Soviet work on defenses, the U.S. Air Force has stepped up work in the Advanced Strategic Missile Systems program and other secret programs to develop penetration aids, highly maneuverable warheads, and other defense-defeating technology. We have no reason to expect that the Soviet Air Force would simply give up on offensive innovations because on a given day our defenses seemed to swing the advantage to us.

We have more positive grounds, however, for doubting that enhanced retaliatory offensive missiles will ever be the bridge beyond retaliation. Here I want to distinguish my argument from the argument that on technological grounds an adequate population defense can simply never be built. According to that argument, the SDI would not be worth building even if (a big if) we thought we had solved all the individual technical problems, because all the different aspects of all the different layers must work well together in an extremely hostile environment (direct attack) the first time that it is used. The first and only test of the extraordinarily complex system will be the one and only time it is used in battle.

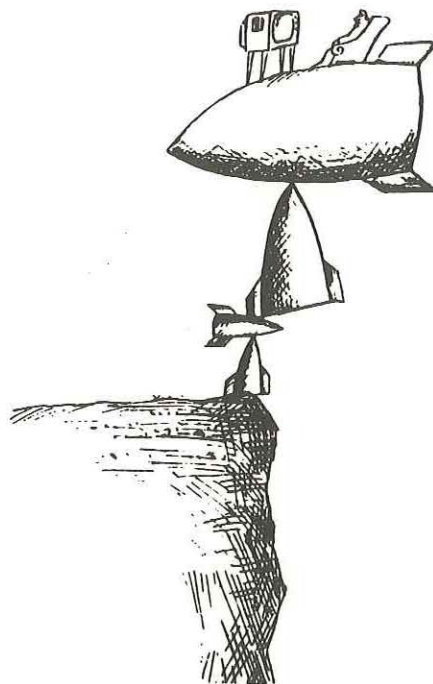
I, however, do not want to say that it cannot be done. What I do want to suggest is this: never in a million years would we develop such certainty and confidence in an untested defense that we would dismantle the retaliatory deterrent, which would otherwise be our only back-up. If this is correct, the moral defense of enhanced deterrence as guarding the transition to the elimination of deterrence fails.

The Air Force's manual on *Military Space Doctrine* begins with the sentence, "Space is the ultimate high ground." With the Strategic Defense Initiative the president has tried to seize the moral high ground

within space. I have suggested, however, that we are still in the swamps we have inhabited for some time. Defensive weapons are not inherently more moral than offensive weapons—it is purposes, not weapons, that count. The president's purpose is lofty, but it is the same goal shared by defenders of assured destruction, advocates of the freeze, and lots of others who disagree about the means. The moral case for SDI will not have been made until it has been shown why it will lead to the elimination of retaliation rather than to a spiral of offensive/defensive arms races, and will lead to the elimination of retaliation more surely than all the alternative routes, like the build-down. If not, SDI will fail to alter the moral scene, and it will fail at phenomenal expense. Its cost, given the uncertainty of its promise, may be the ultimate moral argument against SDI. At the level of budgeting it competes with all the other good we could certainly do, not least of which would be to recapture control over wild budget deficits. Actually to accomplish a few good things seems morally better than to attempt something so grand and revolutionary, but so uncertain of good effect.

—Henry Shue

Paul Valery, *West Germany/Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*



This article is condensed and adapted from "The Moral Defense of Strategic Defense," a talk given by Henry Shue on Capitol Hill as the first in this year's series of Maryland Colloquia in Public Philosophy. Sources cited in the article are: Lewis Lehrman, "A Moral Case for 'Star Wars,'" *New York Times*, February 19, 1985, p. A23; William Burrows, "Ballistic Missile Defense: The Illusion of Security," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1984); and Keith B. Payne and Colin S. Gray, "Nuclear Policy and the Defensive Transition," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1984).