

ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY: THE CASE OF SDI

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I must admit that it's a bit baffling to find a debate raging about the morality of a strategic defensive research program, such as SDI. In the actual conduct of war, moral issues do play an important, sometimes decisive, role — at least in those nations that believe in the existence of things beyond the merely material. And it is surely proper that the strategic, technical, and political aspects of SDI, or any defense system, be subject to vigorous debate. But does it not strike you as odd that the very idea of defending oneself, and defending one's notion of the good, should cause an ethical dilemma?

It would seem to me that in a nation based on the idea of inalienable rights, the obligation to defend the idea that all men are created equal would be simply unquestionable. Today it is not. Jean-Francois Revel recently wrote that, "democratic civilization, is the first in history to blame itself because another power is working to destroy it." There is no better example of this self-denying criticism than the debate surrounding SDI and arms control. The important aspect of strategic defense, so far as ethics are concerned, is what this issue tells us about the moral foundations of the United States and Soviet Union.

The best characteristics of democratic ideals are inherent in our SDI program — the hope of transcending a purely offensive deterrence capability, complete candor, open and honest debate in our own country and with our allies, and an on-going effort to discuss with the Soviet Union the possibility of a transition to a deterrence based on strategic defense.

And the Kremlin's defense program has given us as clear a picture of their politics as we could ever imagine. In return for our openness, the Soviets offer what can only be described as a stunning degree of hypocrisy

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— they denounce our SDI research while continuing their own vigorous strategic defense programs.

The ancient Athenians had a word for those who spent their life, and earned their living, in the practice of making the worse seem the better cause — they were called sophists. The ancient sophists are today well represented by the Soviets — who charge America with “militarizing space” while they quietly and secretly exploit space for military purposes.

Unfortunately, this Soviet sophistry is taken at face value by our critics, while America’s openly acknowledged research into strategic defense is labeled as fuel to the arms race. SDI threatens strategic stability, it is argued, and so makes war more likely. Some critics even go beyond this argument and tell us that they have moral qualms about defense related research. Maintaining a balance of terror — a mutual suicide pact — they say, is the more moral course of action. What is most amazing is that a purely defensive research effort, which seeks only to protect people from nuclear annihilation, should cause such existential angst. I hope this is not a sign that some people can find no moral justification for the energetic defense of liberal democratic values, such as liberty and equality.

About a year ago, the popular magazine *Psychology Today* claimed to have discovered, through survey research, that the most sensitive and well-educated Americans cannot tell the difference between the Soviet Union and the United States. There is good reason to doubt that the survey can be taken seriously, but it is certainly the case that some well-educated Americans — they may even be sensitive — believe there is a moral equivalence between American and Soviet power.

The problem seems to arise, not only from what Revel mentions — that many people have lost confidence in the ideas of liberalism or merely taken them for granted — but also from our desire for absolute perfection. “Liberal perfectionism,” Reinhold Niebuhr said, “is unable to make significant distinctions between tyranny and freedom because it can find no democracy pure enough to deserve its devotion. . . .”

This “liberal perfectionism” seemed to characterize the previous administration, which found it nearly impossible to justify even tepid support for democracies it regarded as less than perfect, such as South Korea. Indeed this search for the pure and uncorrupted democracy was no doubt one reason why that administration did not pay adequate attention to our own national security needs. After all, they probably reasoned, even the United States is not a perfect democracy.

This problem, of course, was understood by the framers of our constitution. Indeed, our imperfection was the precise reason for government in the first place. “. . . What is government . . .” Madison asked, “but

the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary." *Our* revolution, in contrast to the Soviets', was one of sober expectations about what government could do, and what you should expect from fallible human nature. This is precisely why we have a separation of powers — what Madison called a "policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives . . ." Unlike the Soviet system, ours is based on the worth and value and dignity of each individual.

What we seek is to secure individual human rights for all, and this cannot be done in our imperfect world without a powerful military establishment. For the perfectionists, however, the very existence of the military is a sign of failure. Again Niebuhr explained the fallacy in this way of thinking. "[liberal perfectionism] does not," he wrote, "realize that its effort to make the peace of the Kingdom of God into a simple historical possibility, must inevitably result in placing a premium upon surrender to evil, because the alternative course involves men and nations in conflict."

But things have gone so far down the road of denying the dignity of democratic government, that merely attempting to study the possibility of defending yourself against tyranny is for some morally questionable. What can one say, but that this notion must stem from moral and political ignorance.

I often hear that arms control is a more ethically justifiable course of action than attempting to strengthen deterrence through defensive weapons. But how can arms control, in itself, be either good or bad — for it is obviously the consequences of arms control that we're worried about, not simply the process of negotiation. And recent history shows that arms control has hardly been a raving success.

SALT I, for instance did little more than provide a fleeting record of the existing balance of forces, which rapidly began to shift. The Soviets continued to modernize their nuclear arsenal, adding so many weapons of such accuracy and throw-weight that they threatened our retaliatory force. Since 1971, they have deployed at least four new types of ICBMs, nine improved versions of their existing ICBM and SLBM force, and we will soon see their new intercontinental bomber — the Blackjack.

Furthermore, today I can officially confirm that one of their new ICBMs, the Mobile SS-25, is now being deployed and is an unquestionable violation of Soviet assurances given to us under the SALT II accord. This single warhead missile measures just under 20 meters in length and has a range of 10,500 kilometers. The SS-25 is road-mobile and can be housed in launcher garages equipped with sliding roofs. This makes it an extremely versatile weapon. The SS-25 violates the SALT II agreement

that permits development of only one new type of ICBM. Their first new type developed, the SS-X-24, is now being tested.

This isn't, sadly, the only case of a Soviet violation of arms control agreements. A particularly troublesome violation is taking place with their construction of a missile detection and tracking radar at Krasnoyarsk. This is a blatant violation of the 1972 ABM Treaty, which limits such radars to the periphery of the nation, pointing outward to operate only as early warning radar. The Krasnoyarsk radar, however, is located 750 kilometers from the nearest Soviet border and looks across 4000 kilometers of Russian territory. This radar closes an important gap in their defense radar coverage.

Now there has been a lot of controversy over our interpretation of this violation and many people in the west have attempted to explain it away. The technical information we have convinces us that this radar is a violation. But even if there were some doubt about this, what does it say about the Soviet Union that they have so little regard for the ABM treaty that they would not even consult us before they began to build this radar? Even if their motives were pure, why did they not avail themselves of this treaty and explain the intention of this radar? Instead they have pressed ahead with construction.

Even more damning about the history of "arms control" is that it has not brought about any *reductions* in arms. Given the recent history of arms control, it is, I think, difficult to argue that the only moral course of action open to the United States is more of the same. There is nothing moral about a situation in which the strength of the democratic nations is slowly eroded. Again, it is the consequences of negotiations that must concern us. And that is exactly why President Reagan has insisted on real, equitable, and verifiable arms reductions in Geneva.

Also quite frankly, I am at a loss to understand why it is moral to allow the Soviets to develop a defensive shield while we sit back and do nothing. And why is it immoral to research the possibility of creating options for a safer future, which may lessen the risk of war? Indeed we do not think that there is any contradiction between serious arms reduction negotiations and vigorous research into strategic defense. In fact, the efforts are completely complementary. Our critics, however, don't appreciate why real arms reduction agreements with the Soviets are so difficult. The reason lies in exactly what I have been speaking about — the moral foundations of our two governments.

Let me give you one example, of many, to illustrate this point. The United States has openly conducted vigorous research into the potential of strategic defense. We even briefed the Soviets in Geneva on our project, and we are attempting to engage them in serious discussions on the

future relationship between offensive and defensive weapons. We stated, as clearly as we could, our desire to determine if we can move beyond deterrence through mutual vulnerability, to deterrence based on defense. We think this is an effective and moral way to ensure peace — and a better way than the mutual suicide pact we now live under.

The Kremlin, however, has been anything but open and candid. Around Moscow, the Soviets have the world's only operational ABM system, and they spend about ten times as much as we do on all forms of strategic defense. More than 10,000 of their scientists and engineers are involved in one aspect of strategic defense research — laser weapons. In some cases, they are well beyond the research stage. For example, they now have ground-based lasers that could be used to interfere with our satellites. By the late 1980s, the Soviets could have prototypes of lasers that could hit ballistic missiles.

Indeed, the Soviets are using what systems they already have for a potent defense capability. They now have nearly 12,000 surface-to-air missile launchers at over 1,200 sites and more than 1,200 interceptor aircraft dedicated to strategic defense — with an additional 2,800 interceptor aircraft if required.

When faced with this evidence, the Soviets simply deny the existence of their own strategic defense program despite our certain knowledge of its existence. Their primary concern is to insure that our SDI research is curtailed, so they constantly denounce us for generating a new round in the arms race, or attempting to acquire a first-strike capability, or attempting to "militarize space." These cynical assaults against SDI should not surprise us. The Soviets are simply implementing Marx's doctrine that "criticism is . . . a weapon. Its object is an enemy it wants not to refute but to destroy. . . ."

If our critics would take a long and sober look at the reality behind Soviet sophistry, they would soon understand why arms reductions are so difficult.

They would surely see that the Soviet Union and the United States have fundamentally opposing views on the nature and goals of politics. While we attempt to secure individual rights and encourage the widest possible diversity, the Soviets attempt to impose, within the limits of their power, the greatest conformity to their own doctrines. This desire for obedience to their dictates, of course, permeates their foreign policy. Consequently, they will never feel they have accomplished Marx's and Lenin's orders until they have neutralized the world's free nations.

The point is that relations between our countries, at best, will always be difficult. But unlike the liberal perfectionists of whom Niebuhr spoke, we do not expect any kind of complete resolution of our differences. We,

therefore, have realistic notions of what can be accomplished in Geneva, and at a meeting between the heads of state.

Let me conclude by suggesting that there is today a considerable amount of moral and political confusion about our strategic defense program in particular, and U.S.-Soviet relations in general. Edmund Burke said that "the people never give up their liberties but under some delusion." We now see one of the most ugly consequences of the delusion that there exists no essential moral distinction between democracy and communism — the idea that there is no ethical foundation for the defense of free government.

Free people do not always choose wisely, but we believe there exists no better guide to prudent politics than the open clash of opinions. The result of that free clash of ideas is obvious to all — especially our adversaries. We have created the freest, most prosperous and strongest nation in the history of the world. We have a moral obligation to defend it — and we will.