

Great Britain

Beam-weapons debate breaks into the press

Western Europe has two choices in the face of the Soviets' escalation toward thermonuclear confrontation: either to join in developing the defensive energy-beam antiballistic-missile systems proposed by President Reagan in his March 23, 1983 speech and replace Mutually Assured Destruction and Western vulnerability with Mutually Assured Survival, or to "decouple" from NATO and the United States in the vain hope that the Soviets will then leave Europe in peace. A Dec. 28 article in the London *Times* argued that beam weapons would vastly benefit Europe. Written by Gerald Frost, executive director of the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies in London, the piece has kicked off a heated debate in the British press on this question.

Advocating the "decoupling" policy, the lead editorial of the Jan. 3 *Financial Times*, the outlet of the City of London, claimed that: "The Atlantic Gets Wider."

For more than 40 years the Atlantic Alliance has been the central fact of Western political life. The partners might quarrel at times, as over Suez, or more recently over trade issues, but such differences could never threaten the fundamental ties which bound us. Now, however, in 1984, the cohesion of this grouping, can no longer be taken for granted. . . . On the material questions of defence and economics, it is by no means so clear that we are bound by a common interest. The American shield now looks, to a significant and vocal minority, more like an American threat. . . .

In military and economic terms, then, the Atlantic appears to be getting wider—and this appearance is not deceptive. The Reagan administration, simply by being outspoken about doctrines of tactical counter-strike which were in fact first adopted by President Kennedy, has brought doubts which used to be confined to the experts into the popular political arena. The nuclear side of the Alliance no longer has bipartisan support either in this country or in West Germany. . . .

This does not mean that Europe can only sit by and wring its hands. On the contrary, the European leaders, secure in office and much closer together on global issues than they are on parochial ones, are well placed to take the lead in lowering the temperature. This involves a more distinctive European contribution to NATO strategy—based perhaps on an effort to eval-

uate Soviet strength more realistically. . . . The most disturbing result of the American determination to negotiate arms control from strength has been the breakdown of contact on virtually all non-defence issues, for the dialogue of peace cannot be conducted indefinitely in threats.

The Jan. 3 *Daily Telegraph* countered the *Financial Times*'s advocacy of "re-evaluating" the Soviets. Commentator Peregrine Worsthorne derided the folly of those in Great Britain who want to "send the Yanks packing," and warns that Prime Minister Thatcher herself is becoming more prone to the types of anti-American propaganda associated with the demagogic ultra-right-wing Conservative Enoch Powell. Worsthorne calls this mood "no less than the flight from reason that nations, like individuals, occasionally indulge in when possessed of a death-wish.

"As much from Britain's point of view, as from Europe's, an American withdrawal would be a monumental risk, on a scale the magnitude of which the modern generation, so sadly ignorant of even recent history, cannot begin to imagine. . . ."

Warning that American departure from Europe could "cause the third and final world war," Worsthorne continues: "Those who worry about American intervention in Lebanon, Grenada, Central America, or about cruise missiles, can have no idea what real worries once were, and could become again in the event of Europe being left on its own."

Declaring that Ronald Reagan is "a very paragon of prudence, decency, and responsible statesmanship" in comparison to the men who ruled Europe during the 1930s, Worsthorne takes Reagan's detractors to task: "Oh, but Reaganite America—the complaint goes—is unhealthily obsessed with the evils of Soviet communism, as if this was the worst kind of obsession imaginable. Again, one can only marvel at the innocence of the complainers who seem to have no idea about what genuinely obsessional superpower behaviour would be like. . . . Lord forgive them, they know not of what they write.

"As soon as one begins to think about foreign policy seriously—as against speculate about it for intellectual kicks—the overriding importance to Britain, and indeed to Europe, of the American alliance becomes absolutely clear. . . ."

Beams will benefit Europe

Gerald Frost, executive director of the Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies in London, examined the Western European benefits from a beam-weapons program in a London Times article titled "Why a Star Wars Strategy Could Help Keep the Peace" on Dec. 28.

European attitudes to President Reagan's "star wars" proposals—the move to develop a space-based antiballistic missile system, agreed in principle a few weeks ago—have generally contained elements of both amazement and derision.

The arguments advanced by United States analysts in favour of the programme, aimed initially at long-term research, have not even been thought worthy of serious examination in Britain, despite their revolutionary nature and their possibly momentous consequences.

The European media have variously described the Reagan proposals as "absurd," "irresponsibly expensive," "dangerous," and "alarming." There has been almost universal agreement that the development represents another dangerous and escalatory round of the arms race. Strategic studies departments and institutes have either doubted that the proposals are feasible or have suggested that they represent a return to United States isolationism. Few people, if any, have publicly suggested that there might be some important political or strategic advantage for Europe or, for that matter, that there might be colossal dangers to Europe if the Soviet Union were to obtain an unmatched advance in "star wars" weaponry.

It is taken for granted that any benefits the proposals might yield would be purely and narrowly American ones. But if the development is taken in the context of the continuing crisis in transatlantic relations and the recent Soviet arms build-up, then it may be seen altogether more favourably.

Indeed, it may provide the answer to problems, inherent in the NATO strategy of flexible response, which have long been perceived by a number of those with a professional interest in strategic issues—weaknesses which politicians have generally not been keen to expose to public scrutiny. These weaknesses flow from the nature of the ultimate step in the flexible response strategy: the use of U.S. intercontinental missiles in retaliation against a Soviet attack on Europe.

According to a common view, even if the United States was willing to unleash its intercontinental ballistic missiles for this purpose, there would be little point in doing so, for Europe would have already been devastated. In any event, the critics say, no United States president in full possession of his mental faculties would risk American cities to defend frequently "disloyal" European ones. Yet if the Soviets came to believe that the United States might feel this way, they might no longer be effectively deterred. . . .

The question that may come to be asked is not "would the United States press the button against the wishes of European leaders?" but "would the United States ever contemplate

pressing the button if it believed that by not doing so war could be limited to Europe?"

An effective Western antiballistic missile system in space, however, could transform this situation by performing the inestimably valuable task of reducing the scale of the risks to the United States in providing nuclear protection to its European allies. If the risks are judged to be fewer, it follows that United States readiness to accept them is likely to be much enhanced, and the Soviet Union will have to take account of this in its strategic calculations. . . .

Supposing, however, the Soviet Union continues to exploit space for military purposes, ignoring the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 while the United States feels restrained by that treaty for by its critics at home and abroad. A moment's reflection suggests that if that happens, the Western alliance will be doomed; close examination of the consequences only confirms one's initial fears.

If the Soviet Union were to develop the ability to destroy 90 per cent or so of the enemy's ballistic missiles before they re-entered the atmosphere while the United States failed to obtain a similar capacity, the Warsaw Pact might face a unique experience: a queue of admiring, friendly and sycophantic West European states waiting to join.

Since the United States administration is committed so far only to examining the feasibility of "star wars" weaponry, we cannot be sure what degree of direct protection would be provided against missiles targeted on Europe. It is possible, however, that the "killer satellites" thought to be envisaged under the proposals could destroy ballistic missiles such as the SS-20 as well as the strategic weapons aimed at the United States. . . .

Instead of the West signalling its intention to cause massive and unacceptable damage if attacked with nuclear weapons, it would instead be signalling its capacity substantially to withstand such an attack. Assuming that the Soviets continue to develop a similar capacity, we would have moved from mutually assured destruction, a policy which has caused profound if irrational anxiety, to mutually assured survival.

This, arguably, could well bring about a less turbulent and danger-fraught international climate in which it would be easier to reach agreement about reductions in offensive weapons because by switching the emphasis to defensive systems, the stakes would not be so appallingly high. . . .

To be sure, there is a strange breed of extra-terrestrial ecologists who argue that it is immoral to "take warfare" into space. But it is not warfare which would be sent there, but new instruments of deterrence. If that deterrence failed, the result would be a conflict between sophisticated and unmanned machines hurtling through the arid wastes of space, but it would be a war without initial loss of human life.

It cannot be safely asserted that war would remain conveniently in space. What may be said is that the immediate targets would be space-borne vehicles, missiles, or satellites, rather than cities or manned military installations on earth, and that such a conflict could conceivably end with a political settlement before human life had been lost.