

Beleaguered SDI effort at crossroads

by Leo F. Scanlon

The good news about the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is that space-based systems now being constructed will provide strategic defense at a cost an order of magnitude cheaper than offensive missiles—fulfilling the promise of SDI to end the era of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) between the superpowers. Top SDI scientists and engineers, gathering at the annual conference of the American Defense Preparedness Association in mid-March, were told that in spite of inadequate funding, scientific and engineering breakthroughs in the program are occurring at an accelerating pace, and represent the cutting edge of the U.S. aerospace effort.

The bad news is that the increasing threat posed by tactical ballistic missiles, and the strategic requirements facing a reunified Europe, are only partially addressed by the limited capabilities of the Brilliant Pebbles design. More problematic is the fact that the Bush administration has done virtually nothing to support the SDI program, and funding decisions by Congress this year could kill the program outright.

"If we get the same level of administration support this year as we did last year," said one frustrated conference attendee, "we will hold the eighth anniversary [of Reagan's March 23, 1983 SDI announcement] meeting at a couple of tables for four some place," because the SDI program will be dead. Another participant emphasized that Bush's support for SDI has so far been nothing more than "rhetoric and a visit to the Lawrence Livermore Labs."

One element of the problem which is paralyzing the administration was illustrated by Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney, who told the gathering that the continued development of Soviet strategic offensive systems necessitates a vigorous SDI effort, but admitted that he has a serious "difference of opinion" with other members of the administration, notably CIA head William Webster, who do not consider Russian military power to be a threat to the West.

More insidious than the view represented by Webster is the outlook represented by Michelle Van Cleave, a science adviser to the President, who told the conference that the early conception of the SDI put forward by the Reagan administration was flawed because "it was not structured to make incremental contributions to deterrence." In other words, the proposals to use SDI as a combined science and military driver threatened to overturn the fraudulent arms control process. "Since then," she added, "we have made progress." In fact, the United States has tabled a proposal at

the Nuclear and Space talks—which parallel the Strategic Arms (START) Talks in Geneva—which stipulates a three year period of talks once one of the superpowers announces a decision to deploy strategic defenses.

Sen. John Warner (R-Va.) was even more outrageous in his criticism of the Reagan administration, telling a luncheon audience that the SDI had been "totally oversold" and given "too much money to start a program with." Warner and his colleagues have corrected that "problem"—a point which was not lost on the industry representatives who have been trying to build support for the SDI.

Warner dodged questions which would have pinned him down to support SDI with funding, but his bluff was called by a lobbyist who said, "In congressional office after congressional office . . . we are being told that there has not been one call from the White House or the National Security Council" in support of SDI. Apparently surprised by the vigor with which this issue was pursued, Warner promised to take the message back to the President.

Plan to kill the SDI

According to SDI designer Greg Canavan, the problem is deeper than lack of lobbying support in Congress. "In 1988 this program was dead. And I mean the Bush administration was planning to bury it."

Contrary to Van Cleave and Warner, even the Reagan program underfunded the type of effort needed to bring revolutionary directed-energy technology weapons into being on a short time frame. "By 1986," said Canavan, "we saw that we just didn't have anything" we could show to Congress since "each of the directed-energy systems lacked one or another little engineering feature which just wasn't coming along fast enough." Faced with the need to develop a system that would "keep the program in space" at all costs, Canavan, Lowell Wood, and other SDI designers began to work out the Brilliant Pebbles kinetic energy system.

The SDI scientists grew increasingly alarmed. In 1988, there appeared Sen. Sam Nunn's (D-Ga.) proposal for a ground-based interceptor system, and a White House report unfavorable to directed-energy systems. Canavan and others saw Brilliant Pebbles as the only possibility of salvaging the SDI program; as such, it represents a rotten compromise with the full defense shield that is required to protect the United States.

"Brilliant Pebbles bought us about three years," Canavan estimates. The hope is that Bush will make good his promise to give the go-ahead for deployment of Phase One layered defenses, incorporating the miniature satellites and ground-based missile defenses in late 1991, and setting the stage for the deployment of directed-energy systems which will shortly be moving out of the laboratory into operational testing.

Canavan pointed out that Brilliant Pebbles does not solve the tactical problems facing Europe and Asia.