

THE STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE (SDI): STAR WARS

The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), also known as Star Wars, was a program first initiated on March 23, 1983 under President Ronald Reagan. The intent of this program was to develop a sophisticated anti-ballistic missile system in order to prevent missile attacks from other countries, specifically the Soviet Union. With the tension of the Cold War looming overhead, the Strategic Defense Initiative was the United States' response to possible nuclear attacks from afar. Although the program seemed to have no negative consequences, there were concerns brought up about the program "contravening" the anti-ballistic missile (ABM) of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks years before. For this reason, in conjunction with budgetary constraints, the Strategic Defense Initiative was ultimately set aside.

The nickname "Star Wars" may have been attached to the program for some of its abstract and farfetched ideas, many of which included lasers. Furthermore, the previously released science fiction movie titled "Star Wars," caused the public to easily associate this program with new and creative technologies. "The weapons required included space- and ground-based nuclear X-ray lasers, subatomic particle beams, and computer-guided projectiles fired by electromagnetic rail guns—all under the central control of a supercomputer system." By using these systems, the United States planned to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles while they still flew high above the Earth, minimizing their effects. However, there was a large power requirement for these types of weapons — power requirements so vast that nuclear power was the method of choice. Thus, as the reality of creating numerous nuclear plants diminished, so did the ambitious designs. By the end of SDI, the primary focus of the weapons design group was focused on "land based kinetic energy weapons." These weapons were essentially guided missile projectiles. At the end of the Strategic Defense Initiative, thirty billion dollars had been invested in the program and no laser and mirror system was ever used, not on land, not in space.

The Strategic Defense Initiative was eventually abandoned, and after a few years, it was nothing other than a short chapter in history books. With bold intentions, the Star Wars program was hopeful of a revolutionary defense system, a system that was said to be nearly impenetrable. Yet with political pressure, both domestic and international, combined with budgetary conflicts, the Strategic Defense Initiative was slated for failure from the start. Fear of Soviet retaliation due to violations in the ABM treaty from the first S.A.L.T. talks was a primary factor in these international pressures, but United States legislators and congressmen also argued that a creation of a large anti-ballistic missile system would raise tensions between the two nations and potentially spark a conflict. Because having a pre-emptive strike in a nuclear war would be advantageous, both nations were already on edge and so it was decided that any project which could jeopardize the balance would be discarded. The treaties set up by the S.A.L.T. talks remained in effect for nearly 30 years and it was not until 2001 when President George W. Bush cited Article 15 of the ABM treaty and pulled America out. By this point, the SDI was far behind and relations with Russia, no longer the Soviet Union, were vastly improved.

Research by Kevin Crowley

Volunteer for the Cold War Museum

Cosby High School

1. After reading the first paragraph, how would you describe the Strategic Defense Initiative?
 - a. President Reagan's re-election slogan
 - b. President Reagan's endorsement of the blockbuster hit movie "Star Wars"
 - c. President Reagan's expensive program designed to prevent the spread of communism in Africa.
 - d. President Reagan's effort to counter the Soviet Union's nuclear capability of bombing the United States

2. Based on the tone of the first paragraph, what does the word "contravening" mean?
 - a. To commit a secret spy operation
 - b. To violate an agreement
 - c. To provide the country's support for the Star Wars program
 - d. To debate in the U.S. Congress

3. In the second paragraph, the author quotes: "the United States planned to intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles while they still flew high above the Earth, minimizing their effect." What does the quote refer too?
 - a. It suggests that the United States does not have the ability to create a weapons defense program
 - b. The possibility of using lasers to intercept rockets heading toward the United States from another continent
 - c. The nuclear capability that American possesses, which should be used against the USSR
 - d. The statement claims that astronauts will be America's best asset when defending the country from a bombing attack.

4. The article claims that President Reagan's Star Wars program was never enforced. What reason does the author give for the program's failure?
 - a. The creation of a laser system was too dangerous for our astronauts.
 - b. America already had an antiballistic missile system, so the government did not want to spend more money.
 - c. President Reagan was intimidated by the Soviet Union, so he abandoned the effort to build an anti-ballistic missile system.
 - d. A creation of a large anti-ballistic missile system would raise tensions between the two nations and potentially spark a conflict.

5. What is the purpose of this article?
 - a. To inform
 - b. To persuade
 - c. To provide a timeline about the end of the Cold War
 - d. To reveal classified information about President Ronald Reagan