

Editorial

Danger for the SDI

Recently the Office of Technology Assessment of the Congress came out with yet another attack upon the Strategic Defense Initiative. No one can accuse them of lack of perseverance.

Year after year the OTA has submitted what have purported to be objective, scientific evaluations of the program, but which in reality have been attempts at a political hatchet job. Year after year, their pretensions have been exposed and their arguments refuted by all of the top scientists working in the field.

Alas, like a stopped clock, even the most incompetent critics can sometimes prove to be correct!

We have yet to read the OTA report, which has not yet been publicly released, but by the Pentagon's own account, in its recent report to the Congress, the SDI program is in serious danger. The SDI Organization points out in this report that there is no longer any further room to cut the SDI budget.

It is no longer a matter of cutting back on certain programs, or delaying the SDI by one or more years. Originally it had been planned to test several options in parallel, so that the optimal configuration for the final program could be chosen. Such built-in margins have long ago been whittled away as the program has been narrowed to fewer and fewer objectives.

Similarly the program has already been delayed minimally by two years, and this at a time when it is widely admitted that the Soviets are in the advance of the U.S. in frontier areas such as radio frequency weapons, and x-ray lasers. The U.S.S.R. is the only country with a deployed anti-satellite weapons system—not to speak of the fact that they have a functioning SDI system operating around Moscow.

The Pentagon has also released documentation, reported in this magazine last year, proving that the Soviets are violating the provisions of the ABM treaty which prohibit the installation of battle-control radar systems appropriate to the deployment of a national anti-ballistic-missiles defensive system.

Not only does Congress appear to be oblivious to this danger, but it may well be willing to bargain away

aspects of the SDI in the guise of renegotiating the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty in order to specify the elimination of what are called futuristic weapons. One example of a system which might fall in this category, would be "pop-up" x-ray lasers. These would be launched by intermediate range missiles in order to intercept a Soviet missile launch in the boost phase.

The SDIO report to the Congress rejects a 3% level of increase in the budget as totally inadequate to allow them to provide a defensive shield for the United States. But they do not report honestly on the magnitude of the loss already sustained by the program. It is not only the case that certain programs have been put on a slower schedule, such as the extremely promising free electron laser; the emphasis of the program as a *whole* has been shifted from rapid development of directed energy weapons, to miniaturized kinetic kill vehicles.

These are essentially next-generation developments of smart weapons such as the stinger missiles, used successfully by Afghan guerrillas against Soviet planes. There is no doubt that they could be usefully deployed *if they are indeed developed*. The problem is that they represent a technological dead end.

More to the point, there is every reason to doubt that even this fall-back option will be adhered to. Far more likely, is a situation in which repeated cutbacks in the system reduce it in practice, to a modified version of Danny Graham's original High Frontier proposal to use off-the-shelf technology and deploy anti-missile missiles.

This is precisely the Nunn proposal for an Accidental Launch Protection System which would deploy 100 ERIS missiles at one site. This is a proposal to deploy an obsolete concept of defense, which could not even protect against one depressed trajectory missile launched from an offshore submarine.

It is this kind of compromise which will leave the system vulnerable, not only to its disingenuous critics from the OTA, but to the Soviets, should they decide to launch a first strike.