

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Quayle defends curtailed SDI

The vice president claims the Soviets no longer strive for a nuclear first-strike capability.

When Vice President Dan Quayle sat at a conference table surrounded by the Washington Bureau of the *Los Angeles Times* for a lengthy question and answer session Sept. 7, he came across as relaxed, poised, and intelligent. This was a refreshing change; as recently as his interview on the premiere of Sam Donaldson's "Prime Time Live" television show in August, Quayle continued to appear tense and almost ridiculous, as he has consistently over the last year.

Quayle's personality underwent such a dramatic change in reaction to the media's furious feeding frenzy against him during the fall 1988 elections campaign, that some insiders here were concerned that he might have suffered some kind of mild but persisting psychological damage.

What Quayle said about administration policy on the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) revealed that there are, indeed, deep psychological problems in the White House, even if of a different nature than mere jitters in public, and that the problem reaches right to the top and represents a major danger to national security.

The disturbance could be called the "Neville Chamberlain Syndrome," and it seems to behave more like an epidemic than an isolated mental disorder, since British television, the BBC, recently produced a documentary on Chamberlain, claiming that the infamous appeaser was really a hero without whose efforts to placate Hitler, the Allies never could have won World War II.

Quayle said that the Bush administration policy toward the SDI has changed dramatically, away from the

concept presented by President Reagan when he first announced the program on March 23, 1983. The reason for this does not have to do with technological changes, with budget cuts or with any other constraints on the SDI, Quayle said, but it has to do with a changed U.S. perception of Soviet intentions.

Quayle explained that Reagan's first conception of the SDI as a kind of invisible shield, protecting the West like an umbrella, was based on the notion, held in 1983, that the greatest threat to the security of the U.S. was a Soviet preemptive nuclear first strike, against which the West had no defense except the threat of massive retaliation.

Quayle went on to say that such a perceived threat no longer exists, in the current administration's view, and its conception of what the SDI should be, has changed accordingly. He said it is now believed that if the Soviets were to launch a war against the West, it would be more plausible that they would start it in a very limited way, to see how the West would respond before advancing further. He added that even that notion is not nearly as likely as either some small nation firing off a nuclear missile toward the U.S., or even an accidental launch.

Therefore, he said, the current direction of SDI policy, which sees the first generation deployment of the so-called "brilliant pebbles" system using individually guided kinetic energy-driven projectiles, will serve the more limited purpose that an SDI would be called upon to provide under these new conditions.

In that way, the SDI policy under

Bush dovetails with the Accidental Launch Protection System (ALPS) approach to SDI advocated by Senate Armed Services chairman Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), Quayle said. Experts on the SDI know that Nunn proposed his ALPS approach to the SDI as a backdoor way of killing the program altogether. To hear Quayle, speaking for the administration, eager to explain how current SDI policy is now consistent with ALPS, is disquieting, indeed.

For the Soviets, it is encouraging news. How can the Bush administration not be aware of the inconsistency of saying the SDI, on the one hand, forced the Soviets to the arms control table and, on the other hand, that the SDI will no longer be a threat to Soviet intentions? If Bush is willing to acquiesce to Soviet objections to the SDI in this manner, what is to keep up pressure on the Soviets to make further concessions in arms control?

But that is not the most important question. In reality, there is absolutely no evidence to justify a conclusion by the U.S. that the Soviets have changed their military doctrine away from striving to attain the capability for launching a preemptive nuclear first strike against the West. This was the so-called "Team B" conclusion reached in the mid-1970s in the U.S. that Bush, then head of the CIA, reportedly accepted at the time.

It is borne out by much hard evidence of a continuing Soviet buildup of its first-strike ICBM arsenal at a breathtaking pace. Among the most convincing pieces of evidence was Soviet apoplexy over the early direction of the U.S. SDI program. Why did the Soviets react so strongly, if they didn't fear that the SDI could botch their nuclear first strike plans? The grim fact is, however, that if the Soviets did have such a fear, they have it no longer.