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The SDI: A Further Challenge for the US Anti-Nuclear Movement?

Angela Santese

1. Anti-Nuclear Mobilisation in the United States

On 23 March 1983, surprising part of his own staff, President Ronald Reagan announced the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) during a National Address on Defence and National Security.¹ Reagan's announcement was made at a particularly tense moment for the Republican administration from the domestic point of view since it was facing a double challenge. On one side, the Congress was expected to vote in May on the controversial MX missile system and the result of the vote seemed to hang in the balance. On the other side, the country was in the midst of a mass antinuclear mobilisation that also enjoined the support of part of the same Congress.

Indeed, since the end of the 1970s, the American antinuclear movement experienced a renaissance, due also to the convergence between a well-established pacifist tradition and new forms of political environmentalism. This convergence laid the foundations for the mass antinuclear movement of the 1980s that was an unprecedented political and social phenomenon capable of bringing pressure to the various levels of the political system. With the election of Ronald Reagan, the ensuing military build-up, harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric, increasing tensions between the two superpowers, and loose talk about a limited nuclear war that followed, a nuclear scare coursed through American society. The fear of nuclear war reinforced the emerging antinuclear movement, which during Reagan's tenure not only grew but successfully fostered a new, national conversation on nuclear policies and disarmament issues.² As underlined by Paul Boyer, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign (NWFC), the umbrella organisation through which the US antinuclear movement became a mass phenomenon, 'emerged as the political manifestation of [the] fear' of nuclear war and its devastating consequences on human societies and natural environments.³

The target of the NWFC was Reagan's nuclear build-up and his nuclear strategy that, according to antinuclear activists, was increasing the risk of a nuclear confrontation. The Reagan administration was initially slow in recognising the magnitude of the antinuclear sentiment and at least until the end of 1981 seemed more concerned with European protests against the deployment of the so-called Euromissiles. Nevertheless, from the spring of 1982 the White House was forced

to cope with the American antinuclear movement; it created an *ad hoc* interdepartmental group, the Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group (NACIPG) in order to counter the NWFC's influence on public opinion and regain control of the nuclear arms debate.

The origin of the NWFC can be traced to the 1979 annual meeting of Mobilization for Survival, a pacifist and environmentalist organisation, where Randall Forsberg, a defence and disarmament analyst, first introduced the *Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race*. The *Call* demanded that

the United States and the Soviet Union should immediately and jointly stop the nuclear arms race. Specifically, they should adopt an immediate, mutual freeze on all further testing, production and deployment of nuclear weapons and of missiles and new aircrafts designed primarily to deliver nuclear weapons.⁴

The *Call* essentially proposed a bilateral and mutual halt in the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons.⁵ The assumptions behind that proposal were that the Soviet Union and the United States had enough nuclear warheads to potentially obliterate each other many times over and that further growth in the number of nuclear weapons and the development of counterforce capabilities would increase the chance of a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers. A bilateral freeze of nuclear arsenals at existing levels could stop the nuclear build-up and thus be the first step towards reversing the arms race and, eventually, making the elimination of all nuclear weapons possible.

Unlike other arms control schemes advanced by pacifist and antinuclear groups, the *Call* was a moderate proposal: it was devised in bilateral terms and according to Forsberg, Soviet compliance could be guaranteed since 'a freeze on nuclear missiles and aircrafts [could] be verified by existing national means' and 'more easily than the complex SALT I and II agreement'.⁶ The *Call* was thus conceived to appeal to both peace activists and the American public because the backing of these two constituencies was needed to make the moratorium a matter of national debate. In fact, while 'the peace community could mobilize thousands and thousands of committed activists . . . for the right cause', according to Forsberg 'no major disarmament effort can succeed without the support of the majority of middle class, middle-of-the-road citizens'.⁷

Starting in 1980, a coalition of antinuclear, pacifist, church, and civic groups, along with labour and professional organisations, rallied around the proposal and began distributing the *Call* in order to publicise it. At the same time, many grassroots groups started circulating petitions endorsing the freeze and planning for state and local referenda on the moratorium proposal.⁸

In March 1981, the first Freeze National Conference was held in Washington, DC, officially launching the NWFC. According to the activists gathered at Georgetown University, the response of the US government to their proposal would be 'primarily dependent on the extent of public support for the freeze' and thus the priority was to develop 'widespread public support' for the moratorium.⁹

Although the origin of the freeze campaign lay in 1980, it was only during 1981 that it started to build roots outside traditional pacifist and environmental activists. From the beginning of Reagan's tenure, his confrontational rhetoric toward the USSR, along with the arms build-up and the president's apparent unwillingness to reach an agreement on arms control with the Soviets, meant that fear of nuclear war was both increasing and spreading to a broader swath of the general public. In October 1981, the president said that a limited nuclear war was possible, apparently accepting the possibility of a nuclear exchange that was limited to European soil.¹⁰ Moreover, Americans perceived Reagan as more inclined than his predecessor to fight a nuclear war, especially after National Security Decision Directive 13 (NSDD-13) was leaked to the press. According to some media charges, the NSDD 13 was a 'new strategic master plan', devised to ensure the nation could win a protracted nuclear war against the Soviet Union.¹¹ As underlined by Winkler, 'Reagan's relentless drive to bolster the defense establishment and his apparently cavalier acceptance of the possibility of nuclear war' favoured the revival of the anti-nuclear movement.¹²

Public concern about the possibility that the two superpowers would use nuclear weapons rose accordingly. Opinion surveys confirmed this trend: according to a Gallup Poll of June 1981, 47% of respondents thought that it was likely that in the next ten years the United States would get into a nuclear confrontation with the USSR. At the same time, the findings showed that 72% of Americans 'would favor an agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union not to build any more nuclear weapons in the future'.¹³

Despite the growth of the anti-nuclear movement in the United States, up to the beginning of 1982, media attention focused more on European anti-nuclear agitation, which it saw as a mass movement. This perception led 'some Western Officials to worry that [the European movement] could become a political force strong enough to erode NATO unity'.¹⁴ In particular, the media suggested that NATO allies and the Reagan administration were concerned that the anti-nuclear campaign could jeopardise the decision to deploy the Euromissiles.¹⁵ In contrast, the American anti-nuclear movement was portrayed as a more limited phenomenon. In fact, one of the first articles about the NWFC, entitled *Ban the Bombers Back in Business* in the *Washington Post*, underlined that, although arms control was re-emerging as a political question, the US movement, unlike the one in Europe, was not a mass phenomenon.¹⁶ Similarly, the Reagan administration until at least the end of 1981, was more concerned with the European peace movement than its American counterpart. On 18 November 1981, in announcing the beginning of the Geneva Talks, Reagan seemed to refer to the European anti-nuclear movement when he told his audience that many young people 'question why we need weapons, particularly nuclear weapons, to deter war and to assure peaceful development. They fear that the accumulation of weapons itself may lead to conflagration. Some even propose unilateral disarmament'.¹⁷ In the same speech, Reagan announced the so-called *zero option proposal*, which provided for the removal of all Soviet intermediate-range nuclear weapons from Europe in exchange for a US promise not to deploy the Euromissiles. The administration

was aware that this proposal was unacceptable to the Soviets, and the aim was to make them appear unwilling to reach an agreement and thus to portray Reagan as the peacemaker.¹⁸

This situation changed in 1982 when several factors coalesced to suggest that the NWFC was a mass movement. First, from the second half of 1981 on, support for the freeze campaign grew. Opinion polls suggested that bilaterally freezing nuclear stockpiles before cutting the superpowers' arsenals was finding widespread public support: a Newsweek Poll of March 1982 revealed that 60% of respondents were in favour of the moratorium, while a Gallup Poll analysis of April 1982 stated that 'there [was] little question that the nuclear freeze movement has made a major political impact in the United States, and it has the potential to make an even greater one'.¹⁹ Second, petition drives to put the freeze proposal on the ballot at local and state levels for the upcoming mid-term elections were succeeding, with grass-roots activists having gathered 500,000 signatures in 20 states. Particularly significant was the success of the freeze movement in California: in Reagan's home state another 500,000 signatures were collected on a state-wide initiative petition.²⁰ Third and most important, due to the anti-nuclear mobilisation and the increasing public concern about nuclear war, several policy-makers began paying attention to disarmament issues.²¹ In February 1982 Congressman Edward Markey (D-Ma) introduced a resolution calling for a nuclear weapons moratorium in the House of Representatives, and on 10 March, Senators Mark Hatfield (R-OR) and Edward Kennedy (D-MA) did the same in the Senate, laying the groundwork for the discussion of the freeze proposal in Congress. The congressional joint resolution (S.J. 163-H.J. 433) stated that

1. As an immediate strategic arms control objective, the United States and the Soviet Union should: a) pursue a complete halt to the nuclear arms race; b) decide when and how to achieve a mutual and verifiable freeze on the testing, production, and further deployment of nuclear warheads, missiles and other delivery systems; . . .
2. Proceeding from this freeze, [they] should pursue major, mutual and verifiable reductions in nuclear warheads, missiles, and other delivery systems.²²

Given these developments, it seems that in 1982 the Reagan administration became concerned with the anti-nuclear movement that was challenging the basic tenets of his foreign policy, particularly the strategy of *peace through strength*, and whose lobbying activities, directed at both the public and the Congress, could undermine his proposed military budget. Documents reveal that, by spring 1982, the administration began to perceive the growth and influence of the anti-nuclear movement as a threat and developed a grand strategy to deal with this challenge. The introduction of freeze resolutions in both houses of Congress had two main effects: it broke through the media indifference towards the NWFC and prompted the White House to articulate a coherent answer to growing public anxieties about the nuclear danger.

The Kennedy-Hatfield resolution was officially presented on 10 March 1982. The media reaction was almost immediate, with reports about the NWFC beginning to appear in the mainstream national press. The following day *The Washington Post* asserted that the Kennedy initiative showed that ‘the politics of mass protest [was] being brought into play in matter of national defense’ and that nuclear doctrine, ‘once a well-defined dispute among specialists [was] increasingly becoming the subject of popular conflict’.²³ The *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller described ‘a growing number of political, religious and civic groups throughout the country . . . coalescing into a significant movement’ that had ‘gained momentum and political legitimacy’ with the joint freeze resolution.²⁴

During the spring of 1982, the administration was prompted to explain why it could not endorse the moratorium and to clarify what kind of arms control agreements it was seeking. This first White House reaction was an answer not just to the freeze movement and the rising media attention towards disarmament issues but also to the renewed congressional activism. Indeed after the official presentation of the Kennedy-Hatfield resolution, numerous variants as well as additional legislative plans to reduce nuclear arsenals were submitted in both chambers. The large number of arms control resolutions introduced between March and May 1982 suggested that arms control was acquiring a new political centrality.²⁵ Senators and representatives, probably because of the upcoming mid-term elections, seemed to be sensitive to public opinion trends that suggested widespread concerns about nuclear war, and they were anxious to show their electorate that they were working to reach an arms control agreement.

2. Reagan’s Strategy Against the NWFC

From the spring of 1982 onwards, the White House began to perceive the NWFC, public backing of the freeze proposal and arms control resolutions pending in Congress as potential threats to its arms control strategy and military buildup and began developing a strategy to diminish the appeal of the NWFC.

William P. Clark, the National Security Advisor, was at the forefront of an inter-agency effort to develop a policy offensive on arms control and against the freeze movement, through the creation of a new inter-departmental group, the Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group (NACIPG). Acknowledging that a nuclear scare was hitting US society, the group’s goal was to convince ‘Americans whose anxieties are heightened by this movement that our policy solutions best meet their desire that the United States do something to lessen the prospect of a nuclear holocaust’.²⁶ In recognising that public concerns about nuclear issues cut across all major groupings of society, the group intended to influence the broadest possible audience in order to prevent worried people from becoming antinuclear activists. According to the guidelines of the NACIPG, to avoid the further widening of anti-nuclear criticism Reagan was supposed to quickly show that he was as concerned with the peril of nuclear war as US citizens and that he was working to lessen the possibility of a nuclear exchange.

The recommendations discussed during the first meeting of NACIPG materialised with the Eureka College Speech, in which Reagan first made public the American negotiating proposal on strategic nuclear weapons. Although he presented the “starting START” decision as a normal incident in the process of Government’, it was also a step devised to regain the control of the nuclear arms debate and to start building public backing for the Administration’s arms control approach.²⁷ In the speech given on 9 May 1982, 16 months after his inauguration, while announcing the START proposal, Reagan stated that his ‘duty as President [was] to ensure that the ultimate nightmare [of nuclear war] never occurs’.²⁸ That public address, as revealed by NACIPG documents and underlined also by some press comments at the time, seemed to be intended to target many audiences. The first was composed of those American citizens scared by Reagan’s lack of activity in arms control. Polls showed clearly that public opinion not only backed the freeze by a wide margin but that nearly half of the public thought Reagan had not done enough to decrease the risk of nuclear war. The second audience was Congress, which was then considering a number of arms control resolutions. The third was formed by NATO governments, which, under pressure from their own publics, were urging Reagan to show his willingness to reach an agreement with the Soviets, in order to make the dual-track decision more politically viable. Thus, Reagan was in some ways forced to announce his proposal before having completed the arms build-up he considered the necessary precondition to negotiating with the Soviets from a position of strength.

Making a clear negotiating proposal and putting casual talk about nuclear war aside was part of a broad strategy to minimise the NWFC’s influence on public opinion. As shown by the Eureka College speech, the NACIPG worked on the propaganda side by launching a counter peace offensive. Its hope was to lessen the fear of nuclear war and erode public opinion backing for the freeze proposal, by condemning it as perilous for US national security. The administration also engaged in an aggressive battle against the freeze resolution on state and local ballots and, above all, in Congress. Reagan and his staff were particularly worried about congressional activism because they feared that Congress, under the pressure of public opinion, might not just approve arms control proposals that he overtly opposed, but might go further by cutting the proposed military budget and killing his nuclear modernisation program. The administration therefore lobbied hard to defeat the Kennedy-Hatfield resolution or at least to have the House approve only a diluted version of it.²⁹ As for the NWFC, Reagan also used red-baiting tactics to discredit it, attempting to represent the movement as pro-Soviet, Soviet-led or at least infiltrated by Soviet elements.

The Freeze House resolution was discussed for the first time in Congress in 1982: the non-binding resolution asking for a nuclear weapons freeze followed by reductions was approved in committee on 23 June.³⁰ The moratorium would next be discussed by the full House where, *Washington Post*’s William Chapman wrote, the same sponsors seemed to ‘attribute the freeze resolution’s popularity in the House to a national campaign of antinuclear groups which has made it the focal point of elections in many districts this fall’.³¹ Given the political

relevance of the freeze issue for the upcoming mid-term elections, the confrontation between the administration and the NWFC together with all the associations supporting the moratorium was tense. The debate on H.J. 521 took place on 5 August.³² The outcome was disappointing on the freeze front: after a nine-hour debate, the House voted 204–202 to reject H.J. 521.³³ Thus, the resolution backed by the NWFC and its congressional allies was defeated, albeit by just two votes, while the administration's negotiating philosophy seemed to prevail.

Although Reagan won, the victory was narrow, not just in terms of vote margin, which indicated the sharply divided opinion in the House, but also in relation to the intense lobbying effort that the administration put into rejecting the freeze resolution.

Moreover, after the House vote the NACIPG devoted its attention to states expected to vote on nuclear freeze referenda, namely Wisconsin, California, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Michigan, Arizona, North Dakota, Oregon, Montana, and the District of Columbia.³⁴

Despite the Administration's efforts, on 2 November, the nuclear weapons freeze referendum passed in what the NWFC described as 'the closest equivalent to a national referendum in the history of American democracy'. Taking into account the Wisconsin vote, the proposal calling for a US-Soviet nuclear weapons freeze was approved in 9 out of 10 states, in the District of Columbia and in 34 out of 37 cities that had referenda. According to freeze campaign data, 19,175,914 people, 25% of American electorate, cast their votes and the moratorium proposal received 11.6 million yes votes and 7.9 million no votes, passing with a 60% majority.³⁵

In 1982 the NWFC had obtained positive results: despite Reagan's opposition, it could claim victory in the first nationwide referendum on the nuclear arms race while at the same time the new House, controlled by the Democrats, gave hope that the freeze legislation would be approved in 1983 by a wide margin.

3. The SDI: Countering the Anti-Nuclear Movement?

On 3 January 1983, nuclear weapons freeze bills were introduced in both the House and the Senate.³⁶ After approval in committee, on 16 March, the House opened the debate on the freeze bill. One week later, President Reagan, surprising some of his own advisors, announced the Strategic Defence Initiative, using a lexicon that seemed, paradoxically, to borrow themes from the anti-nuclear movement. Given the widespread anti-nuclear mobilisation and the resolution pending in Congress, the SDI speech seems to be another attempt to control and influence the public debate on the nuclear issue.³⁷ The president spoke not only about reducing and limiting nuclear arsenals but also about the possibility of 'freeing the world from the threat of nuclear war'.³⁸ In trying to convince the public that he shared the concerns of anti-nuclear activists, he presented the SDI as an alternative to nuclear war. This was a clear choice that followed the guidelines discussed within the NACIPG in 1982. Behind this strategy laid the belief that it was necessary to deconstruct the widespread perception that Reagan was a warmonger

and convince the public that the president was working to prevent the nuclear Armageddon.

Indeed, during the debate on the freeze resolution in the House, the administration began to add a new strategy to the one based on the constant denunciation of the danger inherent in the moratorium and to the efforts to defeat it in Congress: adopting a rhetoric that seemingly aimed at co-opting the anti-nuclear movement, using the same lexicon and borrowing from it some themes. This strategy followed the guidelines discussed within the Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group in 1982, and it was based on the belief that it was necessary to counter the widespread perception that Reagan was a warmonger: the administration aimed at convincing the public opinion that the president shared the same concern of anti-nuclear protesters about the effects of a nuclear war. Therefore, from this perspective, the SDI became also a powerful instrument against the anti-nuclear movement, basically stealing the anti-nuclear line of reasoning and challenging the NWFC with the same anti-nuclear language, in the attempt to avoid the further widening of the anti-nuclear front.

Indeed, in his Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security on 23 March, President Reagan stated that he wanted to 'share' with American citizens 'a vision of the future that offers hope'. In the president's words, the United States should have undertaken 'a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile with measures that are defensive'.

What if – asked Reagan rhetorically – free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?

With these words, the former California governor announced the Strategic Defence Initiative. The SDI, immediately dubbed 'Star Wars' by the media, foresaw the launch of a vast research project for the creation of a national anti-ballistic system: an anti-nuclear shield that should not only protect the United States from Soviet missiles but 'free the world from the threat of nuclear war'.³⁹

The announcement of the SDI, and the abolitionist tone used by the president, was an alarming development for the anti-nuclear movement for different reasons. First of all, it was understood as a further destabilising system in the already tense nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers, capable of forever compromising the achievement of any nuclear arms control agreement in the future. For this reason, in the following months and years it was constantly denounced by the NWFC as a threat for the stability of the international system since it increased the danger of a nuclear arms race in space and consequently the peril of a confrontation with the USSR. Second, despite the fact that the SDI constituted a danger similar to that posed by other nuclear systems, for the anti-nuclear movement it was very difficult to concretely deal with 'Star Wars'. This difficulty stemmed from the fact that, since it was only a research project, it was complex to mobilise the anti-nuclear constituency against it. Finally, immediately after the public

announcement of the SDI, the anti-nuclear movement interpreted the new system as a specific challenge from a rhetorical point of view, as the president presented it as an effective recipe to overcome the peril of nuclear annihilation.

In relation to the rhetorical dimension of the 'Star Wars' speech, and beyond the interpretations concerning the origins of the SDI, the important fact for the US anti-nuclear movement was that, in announcing this research programme, the president used rhetoric that seemed detached from his usual hard-liner tones used only two weeks before, when he publicly stated that the Soviet Union was an 'evil empire'.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, during the SDI speech, Reagan's language and the words he chose were useful in eroding the public consensus of the anti-nuclear movement, an objective identified by the Nuclear Arms Control Information Policy Group as early as 1982.

Addressing the country's scientific community, Reagan invited 'those who gave us nuclear weapons, to turn their great talents to the cause of mankind and world peace to give us the means of rendering these nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete'. The research programme that Reagan envisioned was to help 'to achieve our ultimate goal': 'eliminating the threat posed by strategic nuclear missiles' and paving the way 'to eliminating the weapons themselves'. The president also stressed how, through this research project, which 'holds the promise of changing the course of human history', the United States 'seek neither military superiority nor political advantage', since the only single aim was a means 'to reduce the danger of a nuclear war'.⁴¹ In an unusually conciliatory way, the president underlined that, through the SDI, the United States did not aim to obtain advantages from the military or political point of view but was pursuing the far more important goal of ridding the world of the danger posed by nuclear weapons. Moreover, Reagan suggested also that he not only believed that the SDI could make nuclear weapons harmless and useless but that it would pave the way for arms control.

As Frances Fitzgerald has pointed out, the tones used in his 'Star Wars speech' seem to suggest that the SDI, or at least the speech with which it was announced to the world, was not just a message to the Soviet Union but also a rhetorical device to address the domestic political situation. During March 1983, the anti-nuclear movement was still supported by a large part of public opinion; furthermore, Congress, which had refused the appropriation of further funds for the MX missile at the end of 1982, was expected to vote again on this issue in May 1983; finally, the House was about to vote for the freeze resolution bill while Reagan's popularity seemed to be declining. According to Fitzgerald, it was to address this political context that the Reagan administration began to think about the idea of launching the Strategic Defence Initiative, which was therefore a rhetorical tool to regain popularity, to unblock the impasse in relation to rearmament, and to co-opt, at least partially, the anti-nuclear movement.⁴²

While in previous months Reagan had underlined on several occasions that he also shared the fears of that part of the public opinion worried about the consequences of a nuclear conflict, he seemed to go further with his speech of 23 March, making reference not just to arms control but also to disarmament.

At least on the declaratory level, the president seemed to adopt the movement's point of view because he not only denounced the danger of a nuclear war but affirmed that his main aim was the elimination of the threat posed by nuclear missiles. This was striking since, for the previous two years, he had argued instead for the need for a comprehensive nuclear rearmament plan to confront Moscow from a position of strength.

The hypothesis that the public intervention on the SDI was elaborated taking into account the domestic political situation seems to be confirmed not only by the rhetoric used but also by the situation in the House: there the Reagan administration was facing enormous difficulties in convincing representatives to oppose the legislative provision on the nuclear freeze that met with a broad consensus in the public opinion and whose approval would have been an implicit condemnation of the management of negotiations with Moscow. Second, the Congress was expected to vote again on the controversial MX missile system in May, and Reagan hoped that being more conciliatory on the issue of nuclear weapons reduction could increase the likelihood of a positive voting result. Finally, since the administration had failed to counter the spread of the anti-nuclear movement and discredit its ideas in the face of American public opinion, it seems plausible that with the 'Star Wars' Speech Reagan was trying to co-opt the movement and that part of the electorate which supported him, trying to convince both of them that, despite the different strategies, both the president of the United States and those who were challenging his defence policies had the same ultimate goal: the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Beside what was perceived by the movement as a rhetorical threat, anti-nuclear activists accused Reagan of wanting to add a new dimension to the nuclear arms race, namely outer space, until then considered only 'an arena for important scientific and peaceful results'.⁴³ Moreover, according to the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, one of the most important actors in the debate on nuclear arms control, 'Reagan's infatuation with Star Wars', coupled with mutual suspicions, American accusations of alleged Soviet violations, and the bureaucratic internal resistance of both superpowers at reaching an agreement, meant the possibilities of a positive outcome of the arms control negotiations was tenuous.⁴⁴ And it is precisely the negative impact on arms control negotiations that the activists denounced in the following years. In its publications, the NWFC presented the SDI as a serious challenge for international security. The movement indeed underlined that 'introducing Star Wars escalates the arms race and sabotages arms control' and that 'by declaring Star Wars to be not negotiable the Reagan administration is declaring arms control not negotiable'. Furthermore, activists underlined that 'Star Wars illegally violates the ABM Treaty signed in 1972' and that 'no major U.S. weapons system has ever been researched and tested without being deployed and Star Wars would be no different', increasing the peril of military confrontation with the USSR. Moreover, 'Star Wars will lead to an arms race in the space. This will increase international tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and prevent further progress toward peace'. Finally, according to the NWFC the main problem was that 'Star Wars seeks a military solution to a problem that should be solved by political negotiations'.⁴⁵

Beyond the constant attempts to gain the public's attention on the perils posed by the construction of the space shield envisioned by Reagan, the SDI proved to be a challenge difficult to overcome for the anti-nuclear movement. Indeed, for the NWFC it was arduous to mount a protest against what was just a research project. The leadership of the Freeze Campaign tried to integrate the protest against the SDI in its agenda: starting in March 1983, the NWFC inserted information in some fact sheets about the SDI and the dangers associated with the placement of nuclear weapons in space, but aside from this, it did not organise any specific public events on that theme. Indeed, according to the Freeze leadership, it was difficult to try to mobilise people around this issue that was perceived as something less concrete than other nuclear systems. Also for this reason, during the rest of the year all the energies of the campaign were focused on convincing the 'US Government to propose a comprehensive, bilateral freeze to the Soviet Union' and on the Euromissiles issue.⁴⁶

In the end, the SDI didn't trigger a mobilisation like the dual-track decision or Reagan's military build-up and the community of experts and politicians primarily discussed it in its technical aspects. However, at the same time, the SDI or at least the rhetorical device and the timing used by Reagan to present it proved to be a challenge for the anti-nuclear movement. From this point of view, the SDI represented the capability of the president to create a situation that was in discontinuity with his warmonger attitude of the recent past and that was useful in defusing public fears of a nuclear confrontation. By being able to reassure public opinion, the president at least partially eroded the capability of the movement to mobilise people, not just against the SDI but more generally around the anti-nuclear issue.

From 1983 onwards, albeit slowly, the SDI entered the public debate, not in its technical aspects, but as an alternative potential tool to avoid the nuclear destruction of the nation. In this way, in fact, together with the general change in the president's negotiating posture and attitude towards the USSR, it contributed to weakening the ability of the anti-nuclear movement to act effectively in the public space.

Not by chance, the Gallup institute made its last poll on the nuclear weapons freeze in September 1984. After that date, opinion polls on arms control and the relationship between Moscow and Washington continued while opinion polls regarding the nuclear freeze proposal were replaced by those concerning SDI, 'a change that reflects how Reagan had managed to successfully redefine the issue of nuclear weapons'.⁴⁷ The president indeed partially succeeded in tempering the nation's nuclear fears by announcing the SDI with a lexicon that seemed close to that of the anti-nuclear movement. The fact that Reagan was able to lessen the fear of a nuclear confrontation and thus also to weaken the anti-nuclear movement was also confirmed by the November 1984 electoral results. The president's challenger, Walter Mondale was a supporter of the freeze proposal, which was also included in the Democratic platform. Nevertheless, the president was reconfirmed with 59% of the vote compared to the 41% obtained by Mondale, winning 49 States (Mondale only won Minnesota).⁴⁸ According to some analysts, Reagan's

landslide victory was due also to the ability of the president to manipulate ‘the issue of war and peace’ and reassure public opinion.⁴⁹

As a matter of fact, the Reagan administration perceived the anti-nuclear mobilisation as a domestic threat that, intertwining with the pressure of allied governments, was putting its nuclear build-up and foreign policy strategy under siege. Moreover, under pressure from US public opinion and Congress, mobilised by the NWFC, Reagan found himself compelled to alter his warmongering image and bellicose rhetoric and prove he was willing to achieve an agreement with the Soviets. Taking into account the domestic pressure and the specific wording chosen by Reagan, the SDI speech could be considered as part of the ‘peace offensive’ devised by the NACIPG in order to challenge the US anti-nuclear movement. And this peace offensive was effective in reassuring domestic public opinion and in eroding, at least moderately, a part of the consensus that the anti-nuclear movement had enjoyed until then.

Notes

- 1 *Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security*, 23 Mar. 1983, on www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32383d.htm.
- 2 On the antinuclear movement of the 1980s, see Lawrence S. Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition – 1971 to the Present*, Vol. 3 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Matthew Evangelista, *Unarmed Forces: The Trans-national Movement to End the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Jeffrey W. Knopf, *Domestic Society and International Cooperation. The Impact of Protest on US Arms Control Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Christian P. Peterson, *Ronald Reagan and the Antinuclear Movement in the United States and Western Europe, 1981–1987* (Leviston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003).
- 3 Paul Boyer, *Fallout. A Historian Reflects on America’s Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), xv. On the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign see David S. Meyer, *A Winter of Discontent. The Nuclear Freeze and American Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1990); Angela Santese, ‘Ronald Reagan, the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign and the Nuclear Scare of the 1980s’, *The International History Review*, 39 (3), 2017, pp. 496–520; William M. Knoblauch, *Nuclear Freeze in a Cold War. The Reagan Administration, Cultural Activism, and the End of the Arms Race* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017).
- 4 Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race, 1980, [Series G-Records of the National Office of SANE – hereafter SRG], [SANE, Inc. (DG 58)-Swarthmore College Peace Collection – hereafter SCPC], box 50, folder ‘Freeze/1980–1981’.
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- 37 On the SDI and the domestic political context, see Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue. Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 179–192.
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- 39 *Address to the Nation on Defense and National Security*, 23 Mar. 1983, on www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/32383d.htm.
- 40 In his speech before the annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida, on 8 March 1983, Reagan had characterised the Soviet Union as ‘an empire of evil’. In this passage, he had made a reference to the anti-nuclear movement and to the proposal to freeze nuclear arsenals, arguing that when the hypothesis advanced by supporters of anti-nuclear issues were taken into consideration, the aggressive impulses of what he qualified as precisely the empire of evil, because this would have meant ignoring the historical evidence and calling oneself out of the struggle between what was right and what was wrong, between good and evil. *Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals*, 8 Mar. 1983, www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1983/30883b.htm.
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- 42 Frances Fitzgerald, *Way Out There in the Blue*, 179–192. Fitzgerald in her study disputes the hypothesis that rearmament and, more specifically, SDI had been deliberately designed to bring the Soviet Union to the brink of bankruptcy. According to Fitzgerald, from its genesis, the SDI was consciously configured as a pure rhetorical exercise and this could be demonstrated by a multiplicity of factors: a part of the scientific community believed that a functioning anti-ballistic system could not be realized; even if such a system had never been built, it would not have made the country invulnerable; its actual deployment would have challenged the mechanism of deterrence that had prevented a nuclear crisis in the past forty years. Therefore, she concludes that in order to understand the reasons that led Reagan to announce the SDI it is necessary to look, not at the Soviet Union, but at the internal political context that was outlined before his ‘Star Wars speech’.
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