

STRATEGIC DEFENSE INITIATIVE

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The Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was a U.S. military research program that President Ronald Reagan first proposed in March 1983, shortly after branding the USSR an "evil empire." Its goal was to intercept incoming missiles in midcourse, high above the earth, hence making nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Nicknamed "Star Wars" by the media, the program entailed the use of 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.

The Reagan administration pedaled the program energetically within the United States and among NATO allies. In April 1984 a Strategic Defense Initiative Organization (SDIO) was established within the Department of Defense. The program's futuristic weapons technologies, several of which were only in a preliminary research stage in the mid-1980s, were projected to cost anywhere from \$100 billion to \$1 trillion.

After Reagan's SDI speech, General Secretary Yuri Andropov denounced the program, telling a Pravda reporter, that if Washington implemented SDI, the "floodgates of a runaway race of all types of strategic arms, both offensive and defensive" would open. Painfully aware of U.S. scientific and engineering skills, the

Soviet leadership sought to eschew a costly technological arms race in which the United States was stronger.

With the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and USSR, signing of the START I and II treaties, and 1992 presidential election of Bill Clinton, the SDI received lower budgetary priority (like many other weapons programs). In 1993 Defense Secretary Les Aspin (1938–95) announced the abandonment of SDI and its replacement by a less costly program that would make use of ground-based antimissile systems. The SDIO was then replaced by the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization (BMDO). In contrast to the actual expenditures on SDI (about \$30 billion), spending on BMDO programs exceeded \$4 billion annually in the late 1990s.

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