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## WILL STAR WARS IMPROVE OUR NATIONAL SECURITY?

by Clair Brown

President Reagan suggested in March 1983 that the United States develop a space-based defensive system (Strategic Defense Initiative, or popularly called "Star Wars") which would diminish the chances of nuclear war and bring greater stability to peace-keeping efforts. Our current system of deterrence, which is based on "mutual assured destruction" would supposedly be replaced by "mutual assured survival." The Star Wars proposal has generated controversy, and the American public must decide over the coming years if it wants to pay for this expensive system. This article evaluates the feasibility and costs of Star Wars and discusses how its development might affect the arms race between the U.S. and U.S.S.R.

**An Illusory Promise**—Americans would like to do away with the threat of nuclear war and would like to use our weapons for defensive purposes. The idea that the best we can do is assure the destruction of the other side if it attacks us is abhorrent. However, even with a defensive system, we must continue to rely upon deterrence to prevent nuclear war. Unfortunately, the development of the Star Wars system will make the current situation more dangerous.

**Is Star Wars Technically Feasible?**—Recently at a Social Science Forum, sponsored by the Labor Center and the State Federation, Professor Owen Chamberlain, a Nobel Laureate in Physics, explained why the Star Wars concept is flawed both technically and politically. The basic controversy is over whether or not the U.S. can develop a full-scale, leak-proof defense system. Most experts agree that a completely leak-proof nuclear umbrella can never be achieved. The technical problems that must be solved to create such a system are enormous and would require expenditures of hundreds of billions of dollars for research and development over several decades. Historically, every "defensive system" devised has been rendered obsolete by new systems developed by the opposing side. Even if long-range ballistic missiles could be destroyed before hitting their targets, low-flying cruise bombers would not be covered by the Star Wars system.

In addition, the deployment of such a system would be extremely difficult. Unless the U.S. and U.S.S.R. deployed defensive systems simultaneously, the current nuclear balance between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. would be destroyed. Without the assurance that they could retaliate to a first strike by the U.S., the U.S.S.R. could not feel secure, which would produce a highly unstable environment. These fears are very real to the Soviets since the U.S. has never been willing for strategic reasons to sign a no-first-use pledge. Before the Star Wars system could be deployed, the U.S.S.R. might become terrified and start shooting at the emerging defenses of the U.S.

**Would Star Wars Decrease the Likelihood of Nuclear War?**—A *partial* defense system is the most that the Star Wars program could achieve for many years (and probably forever). Such a system would ensure that our missiles and bombers would survive a surprise nuclear attack and could unleash a devastating retaliatory attack. However, a partial defense system enhances the retaliatory power of our nuclear weapons rather than allowing us to do away with them as Reagan has suggested would be possible with Star Wars. The Soviet Union's response would probably be to increase their number of warheads at much less cost than our Star Wars system. Certainly the Soviet Union will be unwilling to negotiate arms reduction while the U.S. continues ahead with development of Star Wars.

Many scientists and arms control experts fear that a limited defense system would be provocative to the U.S.S.R. The Star Wars system would be an ineffective defensive system against a massive Soviet attack, but the system might be effective against a weak retaliatory blow by the Soviets in response to a large U.S. first strike. In this way, the Star Wars system could be seen by the Soviets as part of an offen-

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sive system. The Star Wars system could have direct offensive uses, such as to attack and destroy enemy space satellites, which have become an increasingly important part of the military systems of the U.S. and U.S.S.R.

The Star Wars system would make the nuclear stand-off between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. more unstable for two reasons. First, the Star Wars system would reduce the warning time available to the U.S. since defensive attack against Soviet missiles must be immediate. Second, the response to any attack, real or not, would be made automatically by computers. With the short warning time, verification by military personnel would be impossible. The inherent instability of this type of automatic-response system by computer became apparent with the installation of Pershing II missiles in Europe by the U.S. The warning time for the U.S.S.R. of an attack by Pershing IIs is only 6-8 minutes; previously, the warning time had been 20-30 minutes for attack by U.S. submarine-based missiles. This means the U.S.S.R. has only 6-8 minutes to allow a person to judge if an attack reported by a computer is real or a false alarm. In the past year, over 100 false alarms were reported. With the Star Wars system, the warning time would be even shorter, and verification would become impossible. For this reason, Star Wars may increase the likelihood of nuclear war.

**Can Nuclear War be Prevented?**—Professor Chamberlain, along with many others, sees the problem of preventing nuclear war as having a political rather than scientific solution. Both the U.S. and U.S.S.R. must feel that they are equal to the other side in order for peaceful coexistence. However, since controlling the large stocks of weapons now in existence is extremely difficult and since warning time has been reduced for the U.S.S.R., the current situation is extremely dangerous. The most feasible alternative would be serious negotiations to reduce the number of nuclear weapons held by each side. Robert McNamara, former Secretary of Defense, has estimated that the U.S. needs approximately 400 weapons for deterrence, since this number could wipe out one-half of the population and three-fourths of the industrial capacity of the U.S.S.R. This is less than 5 percent of the 9,000 warheads we now have. This means that the U.S. and U.S.S.R. can greatly reduce the number of weapons in place and still feel secure in having a deterrent strategy.

The path of negotiating to reduce the enormous and unnecessary stockpile of nuclear weapons while still maintaining nuclear equality between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. is the most hopeful strategy for preventing nuclear war. If the U.S. decides on the alternative route of developing Star Wars, it will unleash a new spiraling of the arms race, which will make peace harder to maintain.

The Star Wars system, which is estimated to cost \$70-100 billion for a partial system by 1993, will not be the panacea to the nuclear war threat. In fact, it will probably increase the likelihood of nuclear war occurring. The opportunity cost to the nation is enormous. Seventy billion dollars is equivalent to 3.5 million jobs paying \$20,000 annually; it could pay for 1.2 million housing units costing \$60,000; or provide a year of daycare for 19 million children; or provide job training for 4.5 million unemployed youth. Or, our national security could be improved by using the money to assist the economic development of friendly, less developed, countries.

The long-run security interests of the U.S. would be much better served by reducing arms through negotiations with the U.S.S.R. and by spending the \$70-\$100 billion on programs to rebuild our economy, educate and train our people, and improve the standard of living in developing countries.

-- Clair Brown

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