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CANADIAN RESPONSES TO THE STRATEGIC DEFENCE INITIATIVE

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THE STRATEGIC DEFENCE INITIATIVE

"We are launching an effort which holds the purpose of changing the course of human history." With this declaration, President Ronald Reagan of the United States told a nation-wide television audience on March 23, 1983 that he was calling on the American scientific community to furnish the means to render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." The President's bold rhetoric, which caught many of his own advisers by surprise, became identified almost over night as the "Star Wars" speech. It set off a flurry of activity in Washington as policymakers struggled to capture in concrete terms precisely what the President had meant.

The implication of his words was clear enough: the supremacy of orthodox strategic doctrine, the theory of mutual assured destruction (MAD) or deterrence based on the threat of retaliation, was being challenged. In its place, the President speculated, "What if 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 and that of our allies."¹

The difficulty was that, by pursuing a defensive capability the United States risked contravening the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972, a cornerstone of MAD and perhaps the pre-eminent arms control accord between the superpowers in the nuclear age. It had limited the superpowers to no more than 100 defensive missiles, all defending one site. A nation-wide defence was thus impossible, Article V forbidding either party "to develop, test or deploy ABM systems or components which are sea-based, air-based, space-based or mobile land-based." On the other hand, research was not precluded and both sides had pursued active research programs since 1972.

Within days of his speech, Reagan commissioned two presidential panels to examine the technology

and policy options of his proposal. The Defence Technology Study team chaired by scientist James Fletcher became known as the Fletcher panel while two Future Security Strategy teams looked at policy aspects. After review and integration by a senior interagency group, the findings were submitted in November 1983.² Both panels rejected the President's original concept of a leak-proof or absolute defence, suggesting instead that a limited defence could significantly reduce the effect of a Soviet attack and increase Soviet uncertainty, thereby enhancing deterrence. It was argued that such a defence would encourage the Soviets to enter into arms limitations agreements more readily and would increase American resolve to defend its allies, as a result of greater confidence that the Soviet Union would not strike the United States.

The result of the panels' recommendations was National Security Decision Directive 119 setting up the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). It called for "the initiation of a focussed program to demonstrate the technical feasibility of enhancing deterrence . . . through greater reliance on defensive strategic capability."³ SDI would comprise research on technologies with both Ballistic Missile Defence and anti-satellite applications and would be divided into five basic areas:

1. surveillance, acquisition, tracking and kill assessment;
2. directed energy weapons such as lasers and particle beams;
3. kinetic energy weapons designed to destroy their target by direct impact rather than by explosion or directed energy;
4. systems analysis and battle management;
5. support programs.

The U.S. administration estimated that these programs would cost \$26 billion over five years and requested \$1.77 billion for Fiscal Year 1985, a figure that was later reduced by Congress to \$1.4 billion.

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