

## STAR WARS by John Hyde

President Reagan did not have the right to trade away the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) at Reykjavik.

Political theory starts from the assumption that a government's duty is the interests of its people. History, on the other hand, is pretty much an account of paranoid rulers sacrificing their citizens cheaply to their ambitions and personal fears. Although despots, such as Mr Gorbachev, also claim to serve their people, in practice democrats, such as Mr Reagan, have much the better record. The nature of the societies the two leaders represented is central to any sensible assessment of the Reykjavik summit. We would be foolhardy indeed to assume that Mr Gorbachev is constrained by the common Russian's interests in the same way that Mr Reagan is bound by the common American's.

Governments cannot know when, where or how disasters will strike but they can reduce civilian casualties by investing in evacuation procedures, fire fighters, shelters, air raid warning devices, bomb disposal units, quarantine procedures, contingency plans etc. Civil defence is a responsibility which democratic governments accept.

World War II mass bombings of civilian populations were more serious civilian catastrophes than most of nature's uglier tricks, although they cost many fewer lives than the purges of their own or captive populations by Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, Idi Amin or the thugs who now govern Ethiopia. Nuclear weapons have a capacity to slaughter non-combatants which is even greater than the Dresden and Tokio fire bombings when chemical incendiary attacks killed a high proportion of those within the target area. The best civil defence against nuclear attack is to stop the bombs before they land.

Other things being equal, to give away the potential ability to stop a nuclear attack in flight would have been an immoral act.

Ah! but other things were not equal scream the pacifists and Russophiles; Party Secretary Gorbachev was prepared to give away some of his ability to bomb the United States into oblivion if only Mr Reagan had been prepared to give away part - arguably the most important part - of America's ability to ensure it was not bombed. (The U.S. was prepared to exchange some of its ability to nearly annihilate the U.S.S.R. for some of the U.S.S.R.'s ability to nearly annihilate the U.S.).

The trouble with the unequal trade - defensive capacity (SDI) for offensive capacity (SS-20s etc) - was that, even if the U.S.S.R. had kept its word, its remaining weapons would have been more than enough to kill most of the 220 million Americans. Reducing an overkill is good economics but does little for security.

Talking of economics: the USA would improve its security if it ceased to subsidise the Russian economy. Cheap grain and soft

loans allow the communists to devote more of the resources of a weak economy to guns because less is needed for butter.

Mr Gorbachev says the SDI could be used for offensive purposes. I expect it could. Technology that can take out a missile travelling at thousands of miles per hour could no doubt take out a vodka shop in Gorky Park or a wing of the Kremlin. That makes the SDI a truly awesome offensive weapon for political leaders to contemplate - it becomes possible to envisage a war in which the casualty rate of Generals is higher than that of riflemen and in which civilians escape almost unscathed.

Thinkers, particularly Christian thinkers, have given a lot of attention to the concept of 'the just war'. One of several requirements of 'just war' is discrimination - to needlessly kill innocent women and children is simply not on. A second is that of due proportion - to indulge in slaughter beyond that necessary to right the evil is also not on. The moral case for SDI is looking pretty good!

A more credible argument against SDI goes like this: the mutually assured destruction, shortened appropriately to MAD, of the two super powers has preserved the peace between them, if between nobody else, for forty years. If US destruction were not assured, the US might become adventurous provoking a war.

The argument falls down on two counts. First: in breach of the 1973 Anti-Ballistic-Missile Treaty, the U.S.S.R. already has successfully tested anti-missile missiles and it has ground based laser weapons which can stop incoming missiles. (The Australian October 18-19) It seems that there it is well ahead of the U.S.A.

Second: the two nations can be expected to behave differently. The U.S.A. has no Afghanistans and no Gulags. Its governments are bound by democratic rules and by liberal traditions. If the ebb and flow of strategic ascendancy is to give one power the ability to blackmail the other's leadership, I want ascendancy to rest with the United States. It is far more likely to subsidise than blackmail Mr Gorbachev, but if Mr Gorbechev were <sup>to</sup> encourage to reconsider the Afghanistan adventure or release a few thousand dissidents that would be no bad thing.

To have traded SDI for Mr Gorbachev's word would have been irresponsible. The Russian word has a poor record - as shown by the recent nonsense about withdrawing troops from Afghanistan when the U.S.S.R. exchanged six tired units for six fresh ones. Although we should welcome the change of Soviet leadership - at least there are signs that one can deal rationally with Mr Gorbachev - Russian pledges, not backed by adequate inspections and sanctions, are badly bebased coinage.

Finally, the argument which had impressed me most until Reykjavik was: it is expensive and it won't work. Now I can assume only that SDI will work. Mr Gorbachev's intelligence is better than mine.