



Ronald Reagan and the quest for an ultimate defence

by Tim Creery

On March 8, 1983, President Ronald Reagan addressed the National Association of Evangelicals and called the Soviet Union "the evil empire". A couple of weeks later, on March 23, he delivered a national security speech and called upon "the scientific community in this country, 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 weapons impotent and obsolete."

That was the Star Wars speech, in which the president called for the development of a forward strategic defence against intercontinental ballistic missiles. Two years later, the proposal became a program, the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), placed in the hands of a Strategic Defence Initiative Organization (SDIO), to develop interceptor missiles, battle stations in space, laser beam weapons, particle beam weapons and all the rest of it.

The balance of terror, known as mutual assured deterrence, between the evil empire and the shining city on a hill was to be replaced by an assured defence for the shining city, which, Reagan promised, would then magnanimously share it with the enemy.

Five years later, at Reagan's palsy-walsy Moscow summit with Mikhail Gorbachev, a reporter asked Reagan what had become of the evil empire. "I was talking about another time, another era," the president replied.

These extraordinary turns of events are recounted with a wealth of background information and explanation in Frances FitzGerald's *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000), a remarkable combination of intellectual history and lucid reportage that brilliantly limns Reagan and exposes the sham of Star Wars.

The author takes her title from the little eulogy that Uncle Charley - he who was "liked, but not well liked" - delivered at the end of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: "Nobody dast blame this man. You don't understand: Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine ... A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory."

For Reagan, who once told his staff that making policy was their business - "I'm out here selling it. You tell me" - there *had* to be a defence against ballistic missiles. This book leads us through debate after debate, expert report after expert report, meeting after meeting in which the balance of evidence was that Reagan's SDI was not practical. But the dreamer president, bolstered by ambitious scientists, military men, and right wingers, would only concede that SDI might take "twenty years or more" to develop and that it would not be an absolute defence.

At first Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, anxious though he was to reverse the arms race, insisted that SDI be dropped in return for strategic arms reduction. It was Andrei Sakharov, the physicist and human rights activist who, released from internal exile by Gorbachev in 1986 and returned to Moscow, persuaded top Soviet scientists and Gorbachev himself that SDI was not a present danger. For some time it would not be technically feasible, he said, and even if it did become feasible, it would be vulnerable to fairly cheap countermeasures and could not give full protection against massive attack.

With that, Gorbachev dropped the linkage of arms reduction to SDI and proceeded to sign agreements and also to reduce USSR forces unilaterally. Reagan had not been long out of office before the continuing Gorbachev revolution ended the Cold War for good.

Salesmen come and salesmen go, but ballistic missile defence projects, it seems, go on forever. Frances FitzGerald recounts in an Afterword that under President George Bush, the SDIO became the BMDO (Ballistic Missile Defence Organization) and spending stayed at the same level of \$3 to \$4 billion a year. For a while, promise was seen in a new concept, Brilliant Pebbles, consisting of several thousand tiny interceptors floating around the earth in low orbits waiting for the signal to attack enemy rockets rising out of the atmosphere. Before being abandoned, the pebbles had become rather large boulders (100 lbs, three feet long) and, "Apparently the Pentagon was uneasy about the idea of unleashing thousands of robots into space without any human controls."

In 1990 Bush and his aides started recasting BMD in the context of defending against ICBMs launched by renegade states - "rogue states" soon became the favoured term - or by accident. Space-based battle stations were shelved in favour of ground-based interceptors. The BMDers soldiered on. They may not have had the smile, the shoe-shine and the dream, but they knew how to spend taxpayers' money on the military-industrial-scientific complex. FitzGerald reports that: "Between 1983 and the fall of 1999 the U.S. had spent sixty billion dollars on anti-missile research, and though technical progress had been made in a number of areas, there was still no capable interceptor on the horizon."

"(B)ig military programs are rarely cancelled once Congress and the contractors are on board," she dryly observes. As for the Republican right, "the goal was weapons in space - that is, weapons which, if they materialized, could contribute to an offence, as well as provide a defence for the United States".

Once at a meeting in Moscow during the Reagan presidency, Gorbachev asked U.S. General Colin Powell, "What are you going to do now that you've lost your best enemy?"

A dozen years later, this book indicates the answer should have been: "Find surrogates."