

A victory on SDI for Weinberger

by Leo F. Scanlon

Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger has continued to stir up Washington, D.C., winning some decisive territory in the ongoing bureaucratic war over the future of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). A White House meeting, of high-level national security officials with the President, provided the opportunity for Weinberger to secure a commitment by this administration to proceed with the planning for the phased deployment of rapidly maturing SDI technologies as they come on line.

Widely perceived as a decisive victory over the disoriented arms-control approach of George Shultz, and the pernicious budget-cutting of Don Regan, Weinberger's policy will not only assure the earliest possible deployment of defensive technologies, but will also eliminate any "bargaining chip" approach to the SDI, as it guarantees that the only item for discussion with the Soviets will be the President's 1983 offer to "share the benefits of joint deployment" of defensive systems.

"We are not running an academic hobby-shop here . . . we do intend to deploy," the Secretary told the House Appropriations Committee, and emphasized that the White House meeting did not discuss early deployment of existing technologies, which, he testified, the SDIO has deemed inadequate, but discussed the plans necessary to move ahead with a deployment of a first phase of a system built on "new physical principles," and which would ultimately include "directed energy, laser beams, x-ray—any one of a number of destructive methods of dealing with a Soviet missile."

Under questioning by the chairman of the committee, Weinberger elaborated: "We don't believe there is anything on the shelf that we can deploy today or tomorrow, we don't see any possibility of deployment this year or next year. . . . We're talking at the moment, mainly about the success that has been demonstrated in the research in the space-based kinetic kill vehicles. . . . We would only deploy something that would be an integral part of the whole system . . . but we think we are getting close to the point where a deployment decision could be made, and we could get a first phase of a system deployed which could destroy a substantial number of Soviet missiles, and that would be in effect the foundation of this program."

The startled chairman then asked a question which ranks

among the classic interrogatories of an effective cabinet member by a congressman: "Mr. Secretary, every year there is an increasing request for money for SDI, and each of those years we have substantially reduced the request amount; and the information furnished, from time to time, is that if we substantially reduce, we would substantially delay the time of deployment of SDI—now if we have been slowed down . . . how do you then tell us that we have advanced far enough and fast enough, even with those cuts, to be ready for deployment by 1994, instead of 2000 . . .?" The answer offered by Weinberger effectively responds to all the questions raised by press speculation on this matter: All proposed dates are hypothetical. The fact is, that with all the limitations on funding imposed by Congress, and with funding heavily weighted toward kinetic systems, progress has occurred at an astounding rate, and already offers the potential to begin moving the world out of the military geometry of MAD, and into an era dominated by progress in defensive systems.

Both Secretary Weinberger and the SDI Organization have repeatedly stressed that if full funding were provided for the entire array of proposed systems, the rate of progress, especially in the most exotic weapons programs, would be at least as fast as it has been in the realm of kinetic systems. The benchmark of current progress, according to these spokesmen, is the Delta 180 experiment conducted last summer. These experiments demonstrated the feasibility of an array of tracking, pointing, and sensor systems, and the computer programming for battle management systems, necessary for deployment of boost-phase kill technologies—no matter which particular weapon is initially deployed.

A Jan. 30 address to the American Physical Society by SDI official Louis C. Marquet reviews the progress in all these areas, and points out that the question now posed is, which weapons systems should be "plugged into" this boost-phase kill capability? The "mature technologies" are the kinetic vehicles, and represent a path of least resistance (especially for the capital-starved aerospace industry, eager to produce something, anything, but now), and if integrated with the most advanced technologies now being developed, represent the first step of a continuous deployment of an open-ended, evolving, defensive weapon system.

That is the point which most infuriates the arms-control advocates, who now realize that they have been "out-foxed" by the SDI. When questioned about his views on the ABM treaty, in this respect, Secretary Weinberger provided a concise summary, in which he pointed out that the ABM treaty specifically permits the development of weapons systems based on "new physical principles," and also provides for alteration of the treaty itself at the point that deployment of such systems becomes a question. Therefore, the secretary confidently asserted that this will be the primary point of discussion with the Soviet Union, and all other "incorrect interpretations" of the ABM treaty will be muted by the fact that this administration will move the world into the SDI era.