

Fifth, before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be some reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress. We cannot fight a battle with the Congress at home while asking our troops to win a war overseas or, as in the case in Vietnam, in effect asking our troops not to win but just to be there. . . .

We must also be farsighted enough to sense when immediate and strong reactions to apparently small events can prevent lion-like responses that may be required later. We must never forget those isolationists in Europe who shrugged that, "Danzig is not worth a war," and "Why should we fight to keep the Rhineland demilitarized?"

Finally, the commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort.

These tests I have just mentioned have been phrased negatively for a purpose—they are intended to sound a note of caution. When we ask our military forces to risk their very lives in such situations, a note of caution is not only prudent, it is morally required.

In many situations we may apply these tests and conclude that a combatant role is not appropriate. Yet no one should interpret what I am saying here today as an abdication of America's responsibilities—either to its own citizens or to its allies.

Nor should these remarks be misread as a signal that this country or this administration is unwilling to commit forces to combat overseas.

While these tests are drawn from lessons we have learned from the past, they also can—and should—be applied to the future. The President will not allow our military forces to creep—or be drawn gradually—into a combat role in Central America or any other place in the world. And indeed our policy is designed to prevent the need for direct American involvement. This means we will need sustained congressional support to back and give confidence to our friends in the region.

I believe the tests I have enunciated here today can, if applied carefully, avoid the danger of this gradualist incremental approach, which almost always means the use of insufficient force.

We will then be poised to begin the last decade of this century amid a peace tempered by realism, secured by firmness and strength. And it will be a peace that will enable all of us—ourselves at home, and our friends abroad—to achieve a quality of life both spiritually and materially, far higher than man has even dared to dream.

We must be prepared at any moment to meet threats ranging in intensity from isolated terrorist acts to guerrilla action to a full-scale military confrontation. We find ourselves then face to face with a modern paradox, the most likely challenge to the peace—the gray area conflicts—are precisely the most difficult challenges to which a democracy must respond.

SDI Director James Abrahamson

Why NATO needs

As part of a five-part series in favor of the Strategic Defense Initiative, the West German daily Die Welt published a full-page interview with SDI Director Lt. Gen. James Abrahamson on Dec. 1. Below are excerpts from the interview, translated from the German:

Abrahamson: . . . The overriding goal is not simply to create new weapons, but to reduce those that exist and create a more secure world. . . . The fact that the Soviets are so interested in what we are doing is a good omen.

Die Welt: So you think that it is this new American space program that has brought the Soviets back to the negotiating table? A kind of enticement to negotiate?

Abrahamson: I am not an expert in Soviet motives . . . who is? But it must have helped, because this topic is now on the agenda in Geneva.

Die Welt: How can you claim your program is allowed by the ABM treaty?

Abrahamson: Research is permitted. Just look at the Soviet research program that they've been running far longer than we have. Most people overlook this. In addition, the Soviets have the only working [ABM] system in the world. That means, they have considerable experience with it, and have worked with it in their offensive and defensive planning. Beyond this existing system, they have also been researching beam for a long time, as I said. I have a Soviet article right here, written in 1982—very interesting. It describes the plan for the entire architecture that we are just now trying to draw up, and this was written long before the President's [March 23, 1983] speech.

Die Welt: Isn't the conclusion then that both sides, the Russians and the Americans, will quickly go ahead to the development and test phase, and then get together and say: We have to renegotiate the ABM treaty, the progress of technology has made it obsolete?

Abrahamson: No, not necessarily. But your question contains an interesting premise: that the two sides, A and B, will be successful in their research. Secondly, that they will get together and agree that defensive systems are an important contribution to security and to deterrence. That is part of

beam defense

what we are saying all the time. It's the key. . . .

Die Welt: Won't this immense effort—the Strategic Defense Initiative—be nullified by the classical law that every defense can be negated by breakthroughs in offensive weapons?

Abrahamson: I don't know of any law of physical nature of this sort.

Die Welt: Fine, even if it isn't a law of nature . . . at least an empirical fact.

Abrahamson: Oh, really? An empirical fact? What are you talking about? You know, I am not even sure that I know precisely what a defensive and an offensive weapon is. Number one. I admit, of course, that in the nuclear age, which is now over 30 years old, we always assumed that this new weapon, the nuclear missile, represented something like an ultimate weapon, against which defense was impossible. The Russians never shared this Western conception; otherwise, they certainly would never have spent billions of dollars, or rubles, on defensive systems and further research on them. They obviously assume that this contributes to their security.

What you were saying, the idea that every defensive is nullified at the next level by the offensive, is the same thing I hear all the time by our critics among scientists, especially the "Union of Concerned Scientists," among others, and there comes a lot of scientific jargon that I just have to reject. I would go even further and say it's pure nonsense. . . .

. . . I always emphasize the national will to do it. That even has priority over the technological possibilities. Technically, we can do anything, and in my opinion the West has always proved it, and there is one thing you should know: I am a technological optimist. So, again, we can do it if we only want to do it, if we have the will to defend ourselves. But, if we only go part of the way, and then stop, say at 40, 50 or 60%, then the other side just has to conclude, "Okay, we'll just build another three missiles with a certain number of warheads, and we'll get through the shield on the other side. But that is just what we do not want to have the heads of planning on the other side thinking. What we want them to see is the thrust forward, pushing forward to growing international. . . ."

Die Welt: Pushing ahead to 100% protection?

Abrahamson: A precise percentage is not the point. I am telling you that it is far more important that the other side draws the right conclusions from what we are doing, and responds in a corresponding fashion. What should this response be? First, that the continued construction of offensive weapons does not solve any problems, so that disarmament is the only answer. Second: Money, put money and more money into strategic defense. That is what the Russians are already doing, and on a considerable scale, too. That presents them with the same problem we have: the means available. Every ruble spent on the defense, every mind that works on this technology, can not be deployed for developing a new missile that can kill us. Get this into your head: We are not working on a new threat. That is the core point. Not a new threat, but defense against an existing threat.

Die Welt: But what if your allies in Europe don't feel protected by this defensive shield? What if they become distrustful and say: Here are the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. beginning to make their national territories immune, and we Europeans stay behind, unprotected?

Abrahamson: First, I would like to hope that the Europeans do not draw the conclusion that this is driving us apart. The reality is quite the contrary. The SDI program awakens new confidence that the U.S. will have additional options—also to protect Europe, and if there is a crisis, that the U.S. doesn't stand there in such a vulnerable position. That can only be a good thing. And the technology we are working on can also be used in Europe. An SS-20, for example, has similar characteristics to an ICBM when it is launched.

Die Welt: What about lower flying projectiles, like cruise missiles?

Abrahamson: We have a number of studies going on. To solve all of the problems all at once, that I can't do. What I am doing is looking at the problem that causes the biggest instability, the biggest danger, land-based ICBMs. Why did we give up trying to build a defense against bombers years ago? Because of ICBMs. As to the question of what the spin-off of our research is for Europe—someday I hope to go after weapons like the cruise missiles or the tactical nuclear SS-20 missile. There the problem is no more difficult than for ICBMs, as I already said. As for the SS-23 or SS-21, there it's more complicated.

Die Welt: Couldn't one use an ATBM (anti-tactical ballistic missile) against these types of weapons, something like a modified version of the Patriot?

Abrahamson: Conceivably. In the tactical area, there are no treaty limitations, and that's why the experts in the ATBM question are taking a look at whether or not our research will soon allow them to develop better defenses against the attacker.

Die Welt: Can Europe itself work directly on the SDI?

Abrahamson: That is already happening.

Die Welt: One hears from laboratories in California that all this talk about European participation in the SDI project is just an empty political gesture, because American science—to put it crudely—already has everything in the bag.

Abrahamson: I wish that were true. Here you have to have the right perspective. Sure, if you take our “homing overlay” experiment. . . .

Die Welt: You mean the test in June, when an ICBM was hit in the mid-flight phase by another missile?

Abrahamson: Precisely. The June experiment. In this test we demonstrated the feasibility of a certain technology. Now, were someone to say it would be in our interest to go ahead—*fine*, this development could begin. By the way, this technology could well be used for tactical defense [terminal defense] in Europe. It would be quite useful in the framework of the military situation in Europe. And yet, there are a lot of us who are not satisfied with this technology, so we are doing more research.

Die Welt: You surely know another of the objections to the SDI program: that successful defense by the superpowers will just make Europe ripe for a conventional war. What do you say to that?

Abrahamson: Oh, wow! What nonsense! Really, it is high time that a large-scale international debate is started on the whole defensive concept, so that people finally understand that we are saying good-bye to a conception that has been accepted for many, many years.

Die Welt: The concept of Mutually Assured Destruction?

Abrahamson: Yes. And people should think about that, really deeply—about all of the implications. But this shouldn't happen in the same way that one of our congressmen once characterized modern methods of governing: “Government with a T-Shirt.” He meant the inclination to reduce a complicated subject into a brief, emotionally loaded, simple phrase. It doesn't work that way. That doesn't do anyone any good. But, since you raised the question: Here in Washington, we have played through a whole series of war-scenarios for Europe, under the rubric of “What happens in Europe with, or without SDI?” The results were amazing, and quite diverse. Everything starts with the question: What happens if the Soviets initiate hostilities? They will only do that if their chain of thought is carried by a certain confidence, for example, like this: “With the limited action I have initiated here, I also have the option of following up with a massive conventional attack. If that causes problems, I can still go to the extent of warning the Americans that they had better stay out of it, because I could begin to destroy U.S. cities.”

Soviet planners have to pose themselves the question,

when everything starts to rip: “Do we have absolute certainty that we can destroy, and win?” With our defensive research, which puts the last level of escalation into danger, Soviet certainty of victory is more and more reduced. They can no longer be sure that they can keep the escalation in grip.

Die Welt: Fine, but the Soviets could have defensive technology on their side, too, and what. . . .

Abrahamson: All the more reason for us not to tag along behind them.

Die Welt: Yes, but what happens to the NATO doctrine of first-use of nuclear weapons? This would then be cut out. And that would make conventional war possible, because both sides would know that the other side can defend against their nuclear weapons.

Abrahamson: Wait a minute. Who can dictate the conditions of war in such a situation? You claim that the fate of Europe would completely depend on the question of whether 14 men in the Kremlin destroy cities in Western Europe, or not. That formulation is too emotional, and too reductionist.

You have to investigate the entire complex of escalation-dominance, which is not clear-cut even in the SDI case. There is the real answer to your question. There is no simple sequential analysis for the European theater with the availability of defensive systems. People are always making wrong extrapolations.

That is why I want to tell you a great German joke at the end, one I really love. This joke has to do with the kind of conclusions we just talked about. There is the German Academy of Sciences, a meeting with all of the connected organizations of Europe in the German Academy.

They met in Munich, a long time ago, because they wanted to talk about how they might be able to reach the North Pole. They all agreed: Logistics, that is the problem. So, they created a committee for logistics. The committee meets, with really famous people in it, and makes a decision: We have to solve the question. But just doing all the studies takes months.

But, lo and behold, the very next day they call a plenary session and announce: “We have the answer!” “Oh, God! How can that be!?” came a chorus in reply. “So fast?” “Quite simple, really,” said the Committee. “We don't need any logistics.” “No logistics? Honored colleague, what do you mean by that?!” And then came the firm and clear answer:

“Quite simple. After we had left the conference room yesterday, we began the discussion. We turned the corner into the next beer hall, and had a long and lively debate. Our hotel was to the north, so we left this beer hall, and walked another city block to the North. There there was another bar, where we continued the debate. Then, further to the North . . . the next city block . . . and another beer hall. Everything became quite clear to us. You just have to watch out for the beer halls all the way North, because there is a beer hall on every corner going North.”