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## In My View

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## IN MY VIEW

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### WAY OUT THERE

Sir:

Professor Roger W. Barnett's critique of Frances FitzGerald's book, *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, is long on indignation but short on substance. Dr. Barnett certainly is correct to suspect the arms control bias that informs FitzGerald's book. Yet his own critique suffers from a pro-missile defense bias that distorts his analysis of an extremely important, if ultimately inadequate, research effort.

For example, FitzGerald does not assert that Ronald Reagan's administration "got it wrong, at every step, all of the time." Rather, FitzGerald claims that the administration began getting it right in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal, when both the president and his wife sought to salvage his legacy through arms control agreements with Mikhail Gorbachev. Although one can dispute the cause of this "reversal" in favor of arms control, keep in mind that another scholar, one quite sympathetic to Reagan, argues for just such a reversal—Beth A. Fischer, in *The Reagan Reversal*.

Dr. Barnett criticizes FitzGerald for finding Reagan to be "a simple-minded president . . . surrounded and captured by hard-line anticommunists." Here, the reader must decide—especially after reading what Henry Kissinger has to say about his meetings with the president (p. 175), and after contemplating how a president who had delivered the "visionary" Star Wars speech in March 1983 could ask Secretary of State George Shultz in November 1985, "Now tell me again, George, what's the difference between a ballistic missile and a cruise missile?" (p. 534).

Finally and most significantly, while criticizing FitzGerald's "lack of understanding of strategy," Dr. Barnett commits an equally egregious error—that of simply assuming that the Reagan administration's missile defense strategy worked. Apparently, neither FitzGerald nor Barnett knew of the following important facts from Soviet sources:

- In 1985, the Soviet Union initiated its *protivodeistvie* (counteraction) program, which explored asymmetric responses to an American missile defense system.
- The most effective weapon to emerge from that program was the Topol-M intercontinental ballistic missile, which ultimately was equipped with numerous penetration aids of such sophistication that some Russian generals today claim that it can penetrate any missile defense that the United States might deploy during the next twenty years.
- Consequently, Gorbachev wasn't bluffing when he informed Reagan (in November 1985 at Geneva), "I think you should know that we have already developed a response. It will be effective and far less expensive than your project, and be ready for use in less time."
- Gorbachev was proven correct on all three counts when, in 1998, Russia began deployment of the first Topol-M ICBMs. Thus development and deployment survived both the Soviet collapse and the economic duress that post-Soviet Russia experienced during its first decade of existence.

These facts alone undermine any argument about the impact on the Soviet Union of a yet-to-be-deployed and perhaps unrealizable missile defense system. Just as no policy maker should ever assume that every strategy will achieve its intended results automatically (Reagan's almost led to nuclear war in 1983!), no historian should ever misconstrue political and strategic initiatives as automatic political and strategic successes—or strategy as history.

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*Professor Barnett replies:*

Last year I went to a presentation at Brown University by Frances FitzGerald on *Way Out There in the Blue*. After her talk, a member of the audience stepped to the microphone and said that as a physicist he could categorically state that ballistic missile defenses could never work. Spoken within those hallowed halls, this statement astounded me. It does offer some insight, however, into how politics and ideology can befoul one's self-respect. For what self-respecting scientist might sensibly argue the impossibility of an effort that in no way violates the known laws of physics? This is, accordingly, not a scientific judgment, and no pro-missile defense bias or any other bias can distort how such politicized thinking permeates both Frances FitzGerald's book and Walter Uhler's remarks on my review.

In his comments on my review Mr. Uhler writes: "These facts alone undermine any argument about the impact on the Soviet Union of a yet-to-be-deployed and perhaps unrealizable missile defense system." Yet, the strategic significance of the Topol-M missile, which he cites as evidence to support his claim, is minor at best. When Mr. Gorbachev spoke to President Reagan in November 1985 about "a response," the Soviet Union had operational over eight thousand ballistic missile warheads, fully half of which had been added since 1979, when the SALT II treaty was signed (and over six thousand of which had been added since SALT I was signed). The Topol-M is a single-warhead missile, developed to replace the aging multiwarhead heavy missiles fielded in earlier decades. By mid-2002 a mere twenty-nine of them have been deployed. In terms of warhead numbers, and in terms of the U.S. space-based defense that was being developed at the same time (which would have negated the SS-27's onboard countermeasures), the case that the SS-27 had much of an impact on U.S. ballistic missile defense plans is the thinnest of reeds.

As for President Reagan's inability to tell the difference between a ballistic missile and a cruise missile (reported third-hand in a footnote in Ms. FitzGerald's book—Robert Timberg quoting Robert McFarlane's account of Secretary George Shultz's assertion), Richard Pipes has addressed this very issue head-on: "Admittedly, Reagan showed little curiosity about [such] data. . . . Nevertheless, he displayed great discernment and the instinctive judgment of a true statesman, being inspired by a strong moral sense and a sound understanding of what it is to live under tyranny. As someone involved in the formulation of Soviet policy in the first two years of the Reagan administration, I can attest that the direction of this policy was set by the president and not by his staff, and that it was vigorously implemented over the objections of several more dovish secretaries. It rested on a keen grasp of the vulnerabilities of the Soviet regime." Should one

care more whether a president exercises strong, courageous leadership or cannot recall the technical differences between missiles?

With respect to the success of SDI as part of the overall strategy to undermine the Soviet system, the wealth of evidence increases almost daily. For example, Russian ambassador Vladimir Lukin asserted (to quote Bud McFarlane again!) that the SDI “accelerated our catastrophe by about five years.”

Mr. Uhler’s parting shot that “no historian should ever misconstrue political and strategic initiatives as automatic political and strategic successes—or strategy as history” mystifies me. One can agree with such a sentiment in the abstract, but relating it to my review—in the absence of any evidence, and in view of the fact that I make no pretensions to being a historian—requires a significant imaginative stretch.

The FitzGerals and the Uhlers represent the day-before-the-day-before-yesterday’s news. They cannot accept that the Reagan administration had a plan, laid out explicitly in NSDD-75, and pursued it to the eventual demise of the Soviet Union. President Reagan’s lack of interest in the details might be fine fun for the coveys of arms control quails. But who is to say that he was wrong in the key insight that drove, and still propels, ballistic missile defenses—that the American people must be actively defended against all attacks that threaten to kill them in large numbers?

Sometime in the mid-1960s the U.S. government misplaced its compass and embraced Mutual Assured Destruction—it literally went MAD. Ronald Reagan found the compass, but he was unable to convince the arms control community. It was too hung up on the difference between cruise and ballistic missiles, and, like the scientist at Brown University, lost its credibility.