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Toward a Rhetorical Understanding of SDI

THE DETONATION OF THE FIRST ATOMIC BOMB in July, 1945 not only shook the New Mexico desert, but also shattered humanity's symbolic construction of the meaning of war. Before the onset of the atomic age, the ability to wreak devastation upon an enemy was stunning. But the destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a grisly signal to the world that, suddenly, everything was different. The basic power of the universe was harnessed in weaponry, and no defense seemed possible.

When human beings are confronted with a situation in which the ability to make sense of the world is outstripped by the complexities of the changing environment, they attempt to rectify the situation through the use of language or symbolic action.¹ Through language, humans redefine, reinterpret, and rename their situation, and attempt to establish order by creating meanings that make sense of events. Many such attempts at making sense of the nuclear age through language and other symbolic acts have been evident since 1945. But perhaps none are as controversial or compelling as the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).

In a televised address to the nation on March 23, 1983, President Ronald Reagan dramatically altered the national debate on nuclear weapons strategy and policy by proposing the Strategic Defense Initiative. Near the end of his address Reagan stated, "Let me share with you a vision of the future which offers hope. It is that we embark on a program to counter the awesome Soviet missile threat with measures that are defensive."² With these words, Reagan proposed a first step away from mutual assured destruction, toward a concept of mutual assured survival, marking "a major shift in the politics of the nuclear age."³

Most analyses of SDI are concerned with explaining either the technical controversies surrounding the program, or its effects on issues such as arms control, U. S.–Soviet relations, strategic policy, relationships with allies, and strategic stability.⁴ While these studies are important, and contribute to a sophisticated understanding of the effects of SDI on international stability, they ignore a vital aspect of the program, one that can lead to important conclusions about SDI and about foreign policy in general. This neglected dimension is the symbolic or rhetorical power of SDI.

The Strategic Defense Initiative is not merely a collection of technical tools, research bodies, and bureaucratic organizations. Rather, it is an amalgamation of *meanings*; meanings which are shaped by and, in turn, shape a variety of linguistic, political, ideological, cultural, and social forces. These meanings create an understanding of SDI that becomes reality, in the sense that the symbolic understandings of the program influence policy and shape bureaucratic action, which themselves are symbolically constructed. The study of rhetoric, as the analysis and interpretation of public discourse that aims to reveal its various underlying symbolic appeals, is an appropriate way to explore these meanings associated with SDI and to explain their connection to the broader political and socio-cultural context. This approach is similar to the recent turn toward post-structuralist critiques of international relations, in that the focus of the analysis is on discourse.⁵ Treating the “reality” of world politics as text underscores the increasing concern with modernist assumptions of objectivity, dualism, and rationality, and reflects an attempt to uncover relations of power as they are constructed and reified through language. Viewing SDI as a symbolic, rhetorical response to a difficult moral, political, military, and economic problem (the nuclear arms race) sheds light on SDI itself as well as the role that language plays in the formulation of American foreign policy.

In this study, I argue that SDI is a rhetorically powerful and appealing proposal to free Americans from the dilemmas of the nuclear arms race and fears about nuclear proliferation. To establish the nature of SDI’s symbolic appeal, I propose to answer the following questions: (1) How did various actors in the Reagan and Bush Administrations justify SDI to public audiences? In other words, what rhetorical strategies were used to “sell”

the program? (2) What roles do symbolic constructions of history and technology play in explaining the appeal of SDI? (3) How does understanding the symbolic aspects of SDI contribute to current discussions about the program itself, and the rhetoric of war and American foreign policy? (4) How does the prospect of strategic defense affect the functioning of public debate over nuclear weapons policy?

The Rhetorical Importance of SDI

Approaching the controversy over the Strategic Defense Initiative from a rhetorical perspective is appropriate for several reasons. First, as phenomena for study, nuclear war and its prevention are almost entirely textual. In other words, since a nuclear exchange has never occurred in the "real" world, all of humanity's experience with such an event is symbolic. As Jacques Derrida argues, "the phenomenon [of nuclear war] is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it."⁶ Since there has been no direct physical experience of all-out nuclear war, discussions of what it would be like, how military leaders would respond, how world leaders would behave, and how it could be prevented, are all grounded solely in discourse. Even scientific studies of the effects of nuclear war call upon severely limited empirical data from the Japanese experience and nuclear weapons tests.⁷ Given this lack of direct physical experience with nuclear war, Derrida argues:

[Nuclear war] has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions.⁸

Since the rhetoric literally is the reality of nuclear war, the subject is well-suited to textual analysis. Nuclear weapons themselves can be "read" as text, as Timothy W. Luke's analysis of deterrence illustrates. He argues that the objective forms of nuclear weapons represent an exchange of meanings.⁹ Viewing a weapon system like SDI as text allows the critic to

explain the relationships between the weapon and the symbolic milieu from which it emerges and which it in turn helps to shape. Examining the discourse that justifies SDI allows the critic to explore the ways in which advocates call upon the symbolic artifacts of the culture to perpetuate the program, and shape the symbolic environment itself.

As Kenneth Burke argues, humans are “the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal[s]” who mold and shape their sense of reality through the use of language.¹⁰ Human beings use symbols, but symbols also use us, in that the language chosen to describe our environment determines in large part how we behave in that environment. Hugh Dalziel Duncan claims, for example, that the “name” given to poverty shapes how society approaches solutions to poverty. If the impoverished are “lazy,” they are treated with spite; if “victims,” with compassion.¹¹ Similarly, the language used in naming nuclear weapons policies constitutes our sense of the “reality” of nuclear war, and, in this way, has the power to shape our actions—and our fate.

The role that nuclear weapons play in society is highly symbolic as well. Not only does language help to drive, justify, and perpetuate the continuation of the arms race, but nuclear weapons themselves are symbolically important. Ira Chernus argues that nuclear arms have taken on the symbolic meanings traditionally associated with religion. As omnipresent, all-powerful, apocalyptic devices that derive their power from the basic energy of the universe itself, nuclear weapons have taken on the symbolic trappings of a deity. Chernus observes that religious symbols of the deity:

mediate a reality that seems to be infinite—unlimited in power, in knowledge, in space, and in time. This reality transcends rational comprehension; it seems to be alien, inscrutable, and unpredictable. Such a sense of irrational “otherness” is awesome and terrifying; often it is closely linked to the threat of death. Simultaneously, though, the religious symbol represents coherence, structure, and order in the world. It beckons with its assurance of all-embracing security. In this sense, it is related to the promise of continuing life. So religious symbols are paradoxical.... [T]o gain order and life we must accept, and perhaps experience intensely, disorder and death. The two are two sides of a single coin.¹²

Chernus claims that nuclear weapons represent the same two sides of this coin; chaos and order, death and life. Hence, the symbolic meanings of nuclear weapons (like the symbolic meanings of religion) are powerful and deeply embedded in a society's collective consciousness. This study, therefore, can illustrate the difficulties faced by those attempting to end society's dependence on these symbolically charged weapons (disarmament advocates), and can underscore the ultimate appeal of a technological solution that does not attempt to eliminate the *weapons*, but merely their destructive impact. SDI can be viewed as one example of such a technological solution.

In recent years, scholars have shown interest in the role of language in international relations and American foreign policy.¹³ In the field of communication, studies in this area focus on two general questions: first, how does language shape foreign policy? Second, how does the rhetorical structure of American foreign policy stifle dissent and exclude opposing voices? This analysis of the rhetoric of SDI makes important contributions to present understanding in both of these areas. Also, it can provide important contributions to the current scholarship concerning SDI itself.

First, rhetorical studies concerned with exploring the relationship between language and foreign policy focus primarily on the examination of pro-war rhetoric as a genre of discourse. Robert L. Ivie analyzes American pro-war rhetoric and concludes that images of savagery are associated with the enemy in order to more easily assign guilt over the war to someone or some group other than the United States.¹⁴ Others contribute to an understanding of such rhetorical structures by analyzing presidential justifications for involving the United States in various wars. Images of "aggression," "crisis," "force," and high moral purpose combine to create compelling rhetorical artifacts that persuade the American public to support war.¹⁵

All of these studies share an important assumption that is called into question when considered in light of SDI. These studies assume that the "enemy" in foreign policy rhetoric is clearly and concisely defined. Images of the "North Vietnamese," "the Chinese Communists," "the Soviet aggressors," "the savage Indian tribes," or any other enemy can be explained through these theoretical frameworks. But who (or what) is the

enemy implied in pro-SDI rhetoric? The Soviet Union? The "Third World?" The nuclear bombs themselves? The scientists who created them? Ambiguity in pinpointing the enemy targeted by the Strategic Defense Initiative project seems to be strategically useful, in that the "true" objectives of the program are allowed to shift. For example, is SDI intended to be a complete population defense, protecting all American citizens from the evil enemy, the nuclear bomb itself? Or is SDI being developed in order to complicate any intended attack against United States' nuclear forces by the evil enemy, the Soviet Union? Or is SDI intended to allow the evil enemies, nuclear scientists, to atone for their sins of bringing atomic energy to the world? Each of these questions arises in an analysis of pro-SDI rhetoric. Exploring the concept of the enemy, and discussing the rhetorical and political implications of various constructions of the enemy adds to our understanding of foreign policy rhetoric.

In addition to analyzing images of the enemy in foreign policy discourse, scholars have attempted to explain the rhetorical elements of policy by studying various ways in which foreign policy events have been constructed symbolically in order to increase public support for government action. The Panama Canal Treaties, the "fall" of China, the rescue missions in Lebanon, the Dominican Republic and Grenada all have been the subject of rhetorical study.¹⁶

This study similarly attempts to place the rhetoric surrounding SDI into the context of pre-nuclear conceptions towards war and America's role in the global community. America's perceived mission to make the world safe for democracy, its quest to conquer new frontiers, and its "innocent" past all can be identified as underlying themes in pro-SDI rhetoric. In this sense, SDI, as a symbolic construction, harkens back to America's past before the atomic bomb transformed consciousness. SDI attempts to bring America back to the past through the technology of the future.¹⁷

The second group of rhetorical studies of American foreign policy focuses on the way that foreign policy rhetoric entrenches the ideologies and power of elites and stifles dissenting voices. Philip Wander argues that symbolic constructions of America as a nation inherently stifle dissent over foreign policy.¹⁸ The rhetoric of "prophetic dualism" (viewing ene-

mies as the force of darkness and evil, and America as the force of light and goodness) stifles dissent, for who can argue against God and America's holy mission? Opponents of government policy in an age dominated by prophetic dualism are labeled heretics and traitors, thus rendered symbolically powerless. The rhetoric of "technocratic realism" (relying on America's technological base, sound management, and the advice of experts to guide foreign policy) stifles dissent, for who can argue with experts? In a world of experts, the opinions of the individual citizen about issues of grave national concern matter very little. From the perspective of technocratic realism, sound management, not public debate, is all that is needed for an effective foreign policy.

Other studies in this vein include G. Thomas Goodnight's lamentations over the separation of the personal, social, and technical spheres of argument, and his analysis of public discourse over the feasibility of civil defense.¹⁹ In these studies, Goodnight argues that technical reasoning is essentially insulated from public moral argument. Given the logic of the scientific method, technical experts who participate in public policy decision making are not held strictly accountable for their policy proposals. T. K. Jones, for example, is able to argue for the feasibility of civil defense in the public policy arena based upon highly speculative technical reports. Even some of the most eloquent public policy arguers are not able to penetrate Jones' shield of technical reasoning. Goodnight argues that in this way, technical reasoning inhibits public debate on crucial national issues.

Walter R. Fisher's "narrative paradigm" represents an attempt to regain public accountability over technical reasoning and its products through a reconceptualization of all human communication as narration.²⁰ Fisher contends that the "rational world paradigm," which conceives of sound reasoning as rationalistic, clear-cut argumentative structures, more often than not excludes the average citizen from the realm of sound reasoning. Replacing the rational world paradigm with a new concept of reasoning, the narrative paradigm, brings the ordinary argumentation of the average citizen under the rubric of sound reasoning. Public moral argument, according to Fisher, is, therefore, every bit as "rational" as technical and scientific discourse. The insulation of technical reasoning from public accountability is especially relevant when examining nuclear

rhetoric, given the highly technical nature of the weapons themselves and the aloof, esoteric nature of the language of strategic doctrine.

This study contributes to an understanding of these issues by examining a specific controversy that potentially further isolates the public from important foreign policy decisions. As a purely technological solution to the arms race, SDI seems to remove virtually *all* human intervention from this fundamentally moral and political problem. Deploying an antiballistic missile system in outer space removes the nuclear threat as far from human consciousness as is physically possible. As a result, does SDI cut off public debate over the morality of nuclear weapons? Is a technological solution to the arms race more appealing than a political or moral one? If so, why would Americans rather impose a questionable technological panacea than participate in a vigorous national debate over the wisdom and morality of the nuclear arms race? What role does public moral argument play in a technologically advanced society? I propose to provide some tentative answers to these questions.

Finally, I hope to further elaborate the symbolic understanding of SDI by building upon G. Thomas Goodnight's and Janice Hocker Rushing's analyses of Reagan's "Star Wars" address.²¹ Goodnight examines Reagan's March 23, 1983 speech in the context of two previous addresses concerning national defense, the "Zero Option" speech and the "Evil Empire" speech. He concludes that SDI completes Reagan's attempt to create a rhetoric of war that predates Hiroshima, in that it offers an alternative to the arms race (which is immoral) and arms control (which is dangerous in an evil world). SDI is the only way out of the nuclear age, in this view, since the promise of arms control offered in the "Zero Option" speech cannot be kept, due to the existence of an "evil empire." Goodnight contends, however, that Reagan's vision fails, because he acknowledges in the "Star Wars" speech that coupling defensive systems with offensive weapons is highly destabilizing. Thus, Reagan's vision of the future is still fraught with the contradictions of the present.

Rushing presents an impressive analysis of the "Star Wars" speech. She argues that the address is an anomaly, in that it seemingly represents a victory of public discourse over the technical sphere. Reagan's non-technical view of SDI, she claims, defines the parameters for future technical

debate in such a way that it constrains technical reasoning. Reagan is the author of the SDI drama, and the scientists merely actors, she claims. Scientists have but two choices: either accept Reagan's challenge to render nuclear weapons obsolete, and thereby give up the power to define their own purpose; or refuse the challenge, admit that science cannot solve this particular problem, and thereby undermine their own power.²²

My approach builds upon these essays in several ways. First, by analyzing rhetorical artifacts since the March 23, 1983 speech, this study will examine the development of Reagan's and Bush's rhetorical stances towards SDI over time. As challenges and questions arose, both presidents were forced to modify their positions on SDI, and this study highlights those modifications. Second, this study not only analyzes presidential discourse, but also examines statements made by other administration officials. This important addition permits comparisons between technical and non-technical speakers within the Reagan and Bush Administrations, and provides insight into theoretical issues surrounding public and technical discourse. Third, exploring in more detail the contradiction pointed out by Goodnight in Reagan's original address, that defensive systems coupled with offensive systems are more destabilizing than offense alone, sheds light on the causes of this contradiction, as well as its implications for both advocates and opponents rhetorical stances. Fourth, this study challenges Rushing's claim that "Star Wars" represents the containment of technical reasoning by public discourse. I conclude that although Reagan may be the nominal author of this drama, his scientist-actors are modifying the script to fit it into their own language of technoscience. Their more limited version of SDI, as point defense, represents the way the program actually has been developed, not Reagan's vision of a complete population defense.

Method of Analysis

Although there are many useful ways for a critic of discourse to approach a set of texts, Kenneth Burke's dramatic perspective on language informs my analysis. Since nuclear weapons and nuclear war are products of advanced technology and, therefore, symbol use, Burke's conception of

symbols and their influence on human action is an appropriate perspective for a critic concerned with exploring these issues.²³ Burke's ontological assumptions, as revealed in his essay, *Definition of Man*, are grounded in symbol use. For Burke, the human being is:

the symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal
inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)
separated from his [sic] natural condition by instruments of his
[sic] own making
goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by the sense of
order) and rotten with perfection.²⁴

The use of language and the manipulation of symbols, Burke claims, separates human beings from other creatures. This ability allows humans to shape their environment and create reality through symbol use, and therefore, creatively respond to problematic situations as they arise. In an attempt to constantly improve the human condition and perfect the world, people use linguistic genius strategically to define situations in certain ways. Technology, Burke argues, is one manifestation of this "linguistic genius." Symbol use grants a degree of freedom to human beings, as they are able to manipulate their sense of reality to meet changing circumstances. But, paradoxically, the very freedom engendered by symbol use also creates constraints on human choice. Burke claims that symbolicity, responsible for conceptions of "the negative" and hierarchy, inevitably falls short of perfection, thus resulting in guilt. Therefore, although humans are free to shape reality through symbols, they must also suffer the consequences of symbol use: hierarchy, guilt, and alienation.

The use of language is action, according to Burke, since it is purposive and involves choice. It is purposive in that it serves to "form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents."²⁵ The function of rhetoric for Burke, therefore, is "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols."²⁶ In order to explore more fully this function of rhetoric, Burke develops a philosophy of language called dramatism. If the essence of language use is action, as Burke maintains, then the most appropriate and complete metaphor to use to describe and evaluate language use is drama.²⁷

A dramatistic perspective on the rhetoric of foreign policy is appropriate in that it focuses on the ritualistic and symbolic functions of language. In *Permanence and Change*, Burke argues that human beings, as social creatures, have a desire to order and interpret experiences to make sense of their world through symbolic identifications. The creation of a sense of order, or worldview, provides a degree of predictability in a changing and chaotic world.²⁸ As products of each individual's experiences and innermost thoughts, these worldviews are treated with great care and "piety" by the individuals who hold them.²⁹ When events threaten to shake the foundation of a worldview, humans react to re-create a sense of order. Burke argues:

When a superstructure of certainties begins to topple, individual minds are correspondingly affected, since the mind is a social product, and our very concepts of character depend upon the verbalizations of our group.... At such a time, people naturally begin to look for some immovable 'rock' upon which a new structure of certainties can be erected. The accepted terms of authority having fallen into disrepute, they seek in the cosmos or in the catacombs some undeniable body of criteria. They try to salvage whatever values, still intact, that may serve as the basis of new exhortations and judgments.³⁰

Conceptions of the role of the United States in the global arena, as reflected in the nuclear arms race, represent such a structure of "certainties" having "fallen into disrepute," therefore, needing alteration or replacement by a new system of interpretation. The antinuclear movement, for example, challenged the authority of the status quo, naming it immoral and life-threatening. But, in SDI, Reagan proposed an alternative structure of "certainties," based on the appeal of American technological ingenuity, the historical experiences of the nation, and the hope of freeing Americans from the threat of nuclear peril.

Given a dramatistic perspective, any complete statement about discourse and its underlying motive will involve considerations of act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose, known collectively as the pentad. The "act" in discourse refers to any conscious or purposive action called for by the rhetor.³¹ The "scene" is a term denoting location; the place, situation, or

circumstance in which the act is grounded.³² The “agent” is the person or group who is to carry out the act.³³ The “agency” is the tool or method to be used by the agent in carrying out the act, and the “purpose” is the explicit or implicit reason for performing the act.³⁴

Burke explains that the pentad is analogous to one’s hand. Each finger represents a separate element of the pentad, but they all come together in the palm of the hand.³⁵ The palm, therefore, represents the substance of the symbolic act, and each element of the pentad, if explored in depth, can lead the critic to the substance of the discourse.

When analyzing discourse from this point of view, the critic searches the text for accounts of these five dramatic elements, and explores their interrelationships. This “grammar of motives” allows a critic to discover the strategic points where ambiguity arises in a text and, therefore, lends insight into the substance and motive underlying the discourse. By revealing and exploring how the rhetor dramatically shapes reality for him or herself, as well as for the audience, pentadic analysis provides an understanding necessary for critical statements about discourse. This approach will be explained further in chapter 4.

The texts I will analyze include public statements by Reagan, Bush, and officials in their administrations that attempt to explain and justify SDI. Primary sources for these texts include the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, *The Department of State Bulletin*, the *U. S. Department of State Dispatch*, pamphlets and government documents written and released by the administration, testimony before congressional committees, and press releases and conferences. Since I am concerned with the Reagan and Bush Administrations’ efforts to gain support for SDI, literature by non-administration sources concerning the potential applications of ballistic missile defense technologies will not be the primary focus of analysis.

The Historical and Rhetorical Context of SDI

Ever since the development of the atomic bomb, scientists, philosophers, policy makers, military strategists, and individual citizens have struggled to find a place for these weapons of mass destruction in America’s foreign

policy and sociocultural consciousness. The Truman administration, faced with this stunning new development that redefined American power in world affairs, “never worked out a clear strategy for deriving political benefits from its possession of nuclear weapons.”³⁶ Once the Soviets acquired the bomb, the international situation became even more confusing and complex. Convinced of America’s moral, spiritual, and political superiority, President Eisenhower developed a “New Look” of massive retaliation and brinksmanship, which contemplated the use of nuclear weapons in even small scale conflicts around the globe. As Eisenhower once said, the idea was “to blow the hell out of them in a hurry if they start anything.”³⁷

Apparently, this strategy was neither reassuring nor credible to the “new generation of Americans” who elected John F. Kennedy to the presidency. His strategy of “flexible response,” financed through Keynesian economic policies, called for a military response at any and all levels of conflict, ranging from low-intensity conventional war to all-out nuclear war. Flexible response, as the jargon suggests, was intended to provide a policy maker with more choices “than humiliation or all-out nuclear war.”³⁸ By late 1963, however, it became clear to administration officials that the doctrine’s implied assumption of escalation control was implausible.³⁹ As a result, Robert McNamara’s famous “MAD” doctrine—Mutual Assured Destruction—gradually became accepted as the official nuclear strategic policy of the United States.⁴⁰

Since the mid-1960s, virtually all American presidents have relied upon the threat of retaliation as the foundation of their strategic nuclear policies.⁴¹ The MAD doctrine, however, makes some crucial and increasingly challenged assumptions. First, it assumes that decision makers act “rationally” in times of both peace and crisis. No rational leader, according to the logic of MAD, would initiate a superpower confrontation knowing it would escalate to annihilation of both homelands. Second, MAD assumes that a situation of nuclear parity exists between the superpowers. If one state possesses significantly superior strategic forces, it might not be deterred from launching a preemptive nuclear strike in an attempt to destroy its opponent’s retaliatory forces.

In 1981, Ronald Reagan took office convinced that nuclear parity no longer existed between the United States and the Soviet Union. While

campaigning, he repeatedly emphasized the growing Soviet nuclear threat, arguing that a “window of vulnerability” undermined the stability of the strategic environment.⁴² Between 1980 and 1985, Reagan embarked on the greatest peacetime military buildup in the history of the United States, increasing military expenditures by fifty-one percent after adjusting for inflation.⁴³ One-fourth of these expenditures were allocated for strategic modernization programs, focusing on the MX missile, the B-1 bomber, and the Trident submarine.⁴⁴

This massive military buildup was accompanied by rhetoric that was increasingly belligerent and hostile toward the Soviet Union. This rejuvenation of the Cold War reached its zenith when Reagan, in a speech to Christian evangelicals in October, 1982, referred to the Soviet Union as an “evil empire” bent on world domination.⁴⁵ Although Reagan apparently was effective in persuading the public and Congress to modernize and upgrade nuclear forces, some observers argued that he was not quite as effective in discussing publicly issues of nuclear strategy, doctrine, and arms control. An excerpt from a Reagan news conference perhaps best illustrates this. When asked whether nuclear war could ever be kept limited, Reagan responded:

Well, I would—if they realized that we—again if—if we led them back to that stalemate only because that our retaliatory power, our seconds, or strike at them after our first strike would be so destructive that they couldn’t afford it, that would hold them off.⁴⁶

It appears that Reagan was as confused as the average American citizen by the esoteric language, jargon, and logic embedded in the doctrine of mutual assured destruction. MAD depends upon paradoxes to fulfill its function of preventing nuclear war. For example, under MAD the United States and the Soviet Union must be willing to *use* nuclear weapons to guarantee that they are *never used*. States must *possess* nuclear weapons, and, in fact, continue to *build* them, in order to someday *eliminate* them. Citizens must put *faith* in the weapons that they *fear* so much. They must, as Chernus argues, worship the bomb because it will save them from the holocaust.⁴⁷ These paradoxical relationships arise out of humanity’s

attempts to make sense of a terrifying technological gadget that seems to transcend human abilities to comprehend its implications. Thus, the doctrine of deterrence, according to Jonathan Schell, is “the forbidding political and intellectual product of our attempt to live simultaneously in the two worlds—the nuclear, scientific world and the pre-nuclear military and political one.”⁴⁸

By 1980, the fatalism and frustration implicit in this situation erupted into a massive grassroots effort to redefine the role of nuclear weapons in America’s defense posture: the nuclear weapons freeze campaign. A brief discussion of the rhetoric of nuclear freeze advocates is warranted to establish the symbolic context in which Reagan proposed SDI as an alternative vision of the future.

Various special interest groups in the United States have agitated for nuclear disarmament since the onset of the nuclear age. Groups such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the War Resisters League, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, and Clergy and Laity Concerned all have histories of protest against nuclear weapons. Paul Boyer argues that from 1963 to the 1970s, however, the voices of those opposed to the continued stockpiling of nuclear weapons were overwhelmed by several events. The Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963 contributed to a perception of diminished risk; the immediacy of the nuclear threat abated as memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki faded; the “peaceful” uses of atomic energy helped to neutralize the public’s fears; and the complexity and reassurance of nuclear strategy created an apathetic public willing to cede control to experts.⁴⁹

Such apathy held until 1980, when Randall Forsberg, founder of the Institute for Defense and Disarmament Studies and formerly of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, formulated a call for gradual disarmament that captured the attention of the entire nation. Her “Call to Halt the Nuclear Arms Race” was the first formal statement calling for a mutual freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons by the United States and the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ This statement became the founding document of the nuclear freeze campaign, and set in motion a concerted grassroots effort to promote the freeze in municipalities in New England.

With the support of the AFSC, Quaker organizations and local activists, the word about the nuclear freeze proposal began to spread to the rest of the country. By the end of 1981, the freeze claimed 45,000 local organizers nationwide.⁵¹ By March, 1982, over one million people in forty-three states were working to promote the freeze, and the resolution was on the ballot in five state referenda and innumerable local, city, and county elections.⁵² A poll conducted by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White in March, 1982 found that seventy percent of those questioned favored a nuclear freeze.⁵³ It was clear that the freeze was a burgeoning grassroots campaign, beginning to influence state and local politics. Support for the resolution spread rapidly, and millions of citizens rallied around Forsberg's call to freeze the arms race.

Public concern permeated not only local government, but eventually reached the United States Congress. On March 16, 1982, Senators Edward Kennedy and Mark Hatfield introduced the nuclear freeze resolution into the Senate for consideration.⁵⁴ The same resolution was also introduced into the House of Representatives, and, as expected, created significant controversy. While the freeze resolution was being debated on Capitol Hill, public pressure mounted. On June 12, 1982, 750,000 Americans gathered in New York City to protest nuclear weapons, calling for a freeze and gradual disarmament. This was the largest political rally in the history of the United States, and it clearly illustrated the breadth of support for the freeze.⁵⁵

The broad grassroots support for the freeze, however, did not translate officially into political success in Congress. In August, 1982, the House of Representatives narrowly defeated the nuclear freeze resolution by a vote of 204 to 202. Although the resolution failed, the narrow margin demonstrated to many freeze opponents the strength of this campaign, which they had earlier discounted. For example, the conservative *Arizona Republic* reported that "the slim two-vote margin...reveals just how sizeable the pro-freeze movement in the nation has suddenly become."⁵⁶ In addition, the narrow defeat served only to motivate supporters of the freeze to work even more diligently than before. Educational campaigns, local petition drives, and lobbying efforts were intensified, and a "score-card" for rating House members support for the freeze and related issues was developed to aid sympathetic pro-freeze voters in their decisions.⁵⁷

When a campaign such as the nuclear freeze begins to gather support and challenge the power and policies of the government, the prominent leaders of the establishment are forced to respond in some way to the challenge. Pressure continues to mount unless action is taken to respond to the agitators demands. The growing support for the nuclear freeze pressured the Reagan administration in this way. Those under attack, for example, were aware of the potential power of the antinuclear movement. George Yonas, chief scientist in charge of the Strategic Defense Initiative, stated:

The opposition to MX and the freeze movement were very close to succeeding; the Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter...at one point said nuclear weapons were immoral. All of us working in the weapons game were aware of that whole business, including the anti-nuclear movement in Europe. There was a lot of frustration.⁵⁸

Reagan's announcement of a national effort to research, develop, and eventually deploy a ballistic missile defense system can be viewed as a response to this frustration. It is important to consider SDI as an attempt both to respond to the growing pressure from the antinuclear movement and to symbolically create a sense of order in a MAD world. In his "Star Wars" address, for example, Reagan argued that MAD is "a sad commentary on the human spirit," and that America must "be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence."⁵⁹ Even if he did achieve verifiable arms control agreements, Reagan claimed, it would "still be necessary to rely on the specter of retaliation, on mutual threat" to maintain the peace.⁶⁰ But if the United States could use its technological ingenuity to develop a ballistic missile defense system that could destroy incoming missiles before they reached their targets, then it would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete."⁶¹ In this way, Reagan attempted to describe his SDI program as the most appealing solution to a public fearful and confused by the dangers of the arms race. SDI offered hope for eventually eliminating the nuclear threat, while a nuclear freeze would merely lock the superpowers into a stalemate.⁶² Reagan's March 23, 1983 speech can be seen as a rhetorical response to a difficult political and symbolic situation. This speech set the stage for a substantial effort by the Administration to persuade Congress and the public to support the President's plan.

I contend that the Strategic Defense Initiative is rhetorically powerful for several reasons. First, Reagan effectively identified SDI with traditional American notions of destiny, mission, national innocence, and conquering new frontiers. By mustering these forces of patriotism and by identifying SDI with these deeply engrained American ideas, Reagan united his supporters with what he claimed were the greatest traditions in American history. Second, SDI effectively captured the symbolic appeal of the nuclear freeze proposal and nuclear disarmament. Touted as a way to make nuclear weapons impotent and obsolete, SDI seemed to offer a more complete solution to the nuclear dilemma than did proposals for gradual disarmament. Third, the Reagan Administration's SDI rhetoric, especially its claim that SDI was only a research project, created a symbolic niche for the program whereby it was insulated from strong criticism, and, simultaneously, was rhetorically self-perpetuating. Fourth, Bush's attempt to capitalize on the dramatic images of the Patriot anti-missile system during the Gulf War represented an appealing solution to the dangers inherent in the post-Cold War world: regional conflicts which threaten to escalate; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile systems; and accidental or terrorist launches of such weapons. Fifth, by offering a technological solution to these dangers, SDI removes human guilt and responsibility for the nuclear arms race, thus appearing to free humanity from the paradoxes associated with symbol use and its ultimate extension, technology itself. Such a technological solution, I argue, represents a surrender to what Burke calls the realm of motion, and is, therefore, an illusion of transcendence. These claims will be explored in the following chapters.

In chapter 2, the historical influences on pro-SDI rhetoric are revealed by exploring symbolic constructions of America's self-image as a morally superior nation, granted the divine destiny of creating peace and prosperity worldwide. This sense of destiny is evident in competing symbolic constructions of American history. I argue that these historical ideas influence SDI advocacy.

Chapter 3 traces the mounting public discontent in the United States in the 1980s over the nuclear arms race. I review the rhetorical strategies of advocates of the nuclear freeze proposal and the American religious com-

munity, in their attempts to challenge the Reagan nuclear arms buildup. I conclude that their collective rhetorical posture was vulnerable to a proposal like SDI.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the SDI rhetoric of the Reagan Administration. I argue that Reagan's SDI rhetoric tapped into the nation's historical sense of destiny, by proposing to conquer new frontiers with American technology and by providing a "non-aggressive" defensive solution to the arms race. In addition, SDI effectively captured the rhetorical appeal of the nuclear freeze proposal by promising to make nuclear weapons obsolete, without risking Soviet adventurism. Finally, I conclude that the Reagan Administration's SDI rhetoric effectively shielded the program from congressional scrutiny, while simultaneously providing it with momentum.

Chapter 5 is an analysis of the Bush Administration's attempts to justify SDI in an era of the collapse of the Cold War, increasing multipolarity in the international scene, the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, and the rising concern with nuclear proliferation. I argue that the rhetorical structure of the Bush Administration's discourse is similar to Reagan's, in that the old "evil empire," the Soviet Union, has been replaced with new ones, personified by Saddam Hussein of Iraq. I conclude that the symbolic appeal of SDI is maintained, if not magnified, by this transference of the East-West rhetorical form to North-South issues.

Chapter 6 explores the pragmatic and theoretical implications of these symbolic readings of SDI. I argue that the SDI controversy illustrates the erosion of an ideal public sphere of discourse in two ways. First, SDI is a compelling example of presidential power manifested rhetorically, which serves to dominate public debate over foreign policy and quell dissent. Second, SDI represents a complete surrendering of the public sphere of discourse to technical rationality. Embracing technological solutions to the arms race removes the need for moral and political solutions, as well as the public debate required to formulate them.