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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
I. F. STONE
America's greatest modern newspaperman

*Had the press in the Reagan era approached
the standard set by I. F. Stone's Weekly,
this book would have been unnecessary.*

AND TO
DICK GOLDENSOHN
(1945–85)

*a journalist of heart and soul, who lived
by the adage that the role of the press was to
comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable,
and whose spirit, it is hoped, lives on in these pages*

like CBS, devoted most of their coverage to analyzing the palace politics the proposal aroused in Congress. The networks never really focused on the issue, even after *The New York Times* published a front-page story on May 30, 1982, headlined "Pentagon Draws Up First Strategy for Fighting a Long Nuclear War," which led other newspapers briefly to pursue the story and fifty members of Congress to call on the President to reassess the policy.

And so it was in keeping with the spirit of the times that when Reagan in the spring of 1982 began invoking the specter of Soviet superiority as the reason he opposed a U.S.-Soviet nuclear freeze, the press for the most part let the distortion pass unremarked. At his March 31, 1982, press conference, for example, UPI's Helen Thomas asked the President why the United States did not seek negotiations toward reducing the number of "doomsday" weapons both superpowers maintained. Mr. Reagan explained that "the truth of the matter is that on balance the Soviet Union does have a definite margin of superiority." Ironically, this was the first Reagan press conference conducted on live, prime-time national television as part of his public relations apparatus's previously mentioned strategy for overcoming the gaffe problem. Now, on the very first question, Reagan had made an egregious misstatement of fact. But no matter. If any of the reporters noticed Reagan's error, they were good enough not to bring it up.

On the next day's *CBS Evening News*, anchor Dan Rather also declined to dispute the President's judgment. Before introducing a report on a briefing U.S. senators would soon receive on "the Soviet threat," Rather noted only that Mr. Reagan had gone "further than any of his predecessors or his top advisers ever have gone in assessing the nuclear balance." In a second story broadcast ten days later, Rather seemed to imply that rough nuclear parity existed between the superpowers, but still shrank from contradicting the President's "stunning statement" directly. Neither of the other two network evening news shows bothered to scrutinize Reagan's assertion at all. Unchastened, Reagan continued to assault the truth about the nuclear equation for the rest of his presidency.

Another of Mr. Reagan's criticisms of the freeze was that it simply wasn't good enough; he wanted to shrink, not freeze, nuclear arsenals. Toward that end, in a May 9, 1982, speech at his alma mater, Eureka College, the President unveiled START,

his administration's second nuclear arms initiative. Like the Zero Option proposal, START—for Strategic Arms Reduction Talks—an acronym coined by James Baker, stressed the idea of radical weapons *reductions* as a way of convincing the public of Reagan's sincerity as a peacemaker. And also like the Zero Option, START was believed by senior White House officials to be unacceptable to the Soviets. Both Deaver and another senior White House official confirmed to me that START was regarded inside the administration as "non-negotiable."

With its overwhelming emphasis on dismantling large, land-based missiles, START was obviously biased against the Soviets; such missiles were the *basis* of the Soviet arsenal but only one part of the U.S. nuclear triad. President Reagan, however, as he himself admitted some seventeen months later to a group of congressmen, was unaware of this basic fact about the Soviet arsenal. Thus he had no idea that the Soviets would regard START as an attempt by the United States to gain nuclear superiority. Troubling as that ignorance was, it was nothing compared to an assertion Reagan made while defending START at his May 13 press conference. The reason START had emphasized reductions in land-based missiles, Reagan explained, rather than reductions in submarine-launched missiles (in which the United States enjoyed clear superiority), was that submarine-launched missiles, like bombers, were not as dangerous because they "can be intercepted. They can be recalled."

If ever one of Reagan's errors deserved headline coverage, this was it. For the man with his finger on the nuclear button to believe he could change his mind and call back missiles he had ordered launched was alarming news, and raised the most serious of questions about his fitness to be President. Yet not one of the press conference reporters pursued the issue that night with Reagan. Even more astonishing, Reagan's remark went virtually unmentioned the next day as the press, especially the three network evening newscasts, focused most of its attention on the continuing Falklands war.

As for the START proposal itself, while it did not receive quite the enthusiastic greeting that Zero Option did, neither did the press expose it as the transparently one-sided sham it was. Both Rather of CBS and John Chancellor of NBC praised START for being exactly what White House officials privately knew it was

thereby trivialized the movement, treating it as a political spectacle whose existence deserved coverage but whose ideas were naïve to the point of irrelevance. An unmistakable air of condescension permeated much of the coverage. It was as if the freeze were a precocious child who had unexpectedly articulated a piercing insight but who now would be sent on his way with a smile and a pat on the head so that the family elders could get on with actually *solving* the problem at hand.

Typical of the coverage was a report by CBS correspondent Bruce Morton on June 6, 1982, six days before the disarmament rally that brought nearly a million demonstrators to New York's Central Park. Opening with a shot of a winsome canine sporting a "Dogs for Disarmament" sign on its back, the report dismissed the freeze as mere fad, a feel-good collection of trendy celebrities, the 1980s equivalent of "radical chic." Morton gave the freeze some credit—"It got our attention," he said, and helped spur the United Nations special session on disarmament and the U.S.-Soviet arms talks—but ultimately concluded with the put-down that "celebrating serious issues in frivolous fashions just may be the American way."

The freeze was portrayed this way—as a group of sincere, well-meaning but hopelessly simpleminded individuals—largely because that is how the purveyors of American conventional wisdom, both in politics and in journalism, regarded them. While government officials could safely depend on seeing their policy pronouncements respectfully reported on the evening news and in the morning papers, dissenting views on the arms race were only very rarely given a hearing. Rueven Frank, the president of NBC News during the early 1980s, when freeze fever was at its height, remarked in an interview for this book that news coverage during the Reagan years had been largely bereft of controversy because the country was living through "a bland period" then. Asked to square that judgment with the explosion of the nuclear freeze movement, Frank replied, "Nobody gives a shit about disarmament, ever. Nuclear freeze is a gimmick! It's 'Let's end war!' I don't know what you can report seriously in twenty minutes about those things."

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THE RHETORICAL onslaught against the freeze escalated with President Reagan's March 1983 announcement of the Strategic

Defense Initiative. Just as the administration had sought to pacify the European public with its Zero Option proposal in 1981, so now it would try to entrance Americans with visions of a magic nuclear shield. As a means of deflating public pressure for genuine disarmament, SDI went an important step beyond the administration's previous ploys. For rather than proposing mere reductions in nuclear arsenals, it promised to neutralize those arsenals altogether. The Strategic Defense Initiative, the President told the nation, would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete."

Yet unlike the Zero Option, Reagan's promotion of SDI seems not to have been motivated primarily by propaganda concerns—nor by military ones, for that matter. In fact, the announcement of SDI came as a surprise to many top Reagan officials, both in the White House and in the Pentagon. While some Reagan officials did claim to favor SDI for strategic reasons, the available evidence suggests that, more than anything else, SDI was about keeping the U.S. military-industrial complex busy and growing. At a projected end cost of at least \$400 billion (and probably much more), SDI represented the next stage in the multibillion-dollar federal subsidy program otherwise known as the arms race. In the words of one Rockwell Corporation promotional booklet, space offered a vast new "Frontier for Growth, Leadership and Freedom."

Which is not to suggest that Reagan and his men were blind to SDI's public relations possibilities. At a time when the nuclear freeze movement was continuing to gain strength across the land, SDI gave the administration a chance to reclaim the initiative, and the moral high ground, in the arms debate. Why bother with a nuclear freeze which would only keep the mutual balance of terror in place? The President shared Americans' fears of these terrible weapons; that was why he wanted to build a peace shield. Never mind that the sort of protective umbrella Reagan had in mind was a technological impossibility; it was the thought that counted.

"I didn't understand SDI," Michael Deaver told me. "All I understood was that it could negate a nuclear war. It was a great idea, a defense that we would give to the Russians. Who could argue with that?" Deaver said news reports questioning whether such a system could work didn't worry him: "I wouldn't know if it worked or didn't work. The *concept* was a great idea." Without