

# Strategic Defense Initiative: Moral Questions, Public Choices

---

*A resource on the moral dimensions of SDI based on the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Moral Evaluation of Deterrence of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1988*

## Introduction

The Strategic Defense Initiative, the effort to develop defenses against nuclear missiles, is perhaps the single most important issue of military policy and arms control facing the United States today. It is important because:

- Many supporters of SDI propose it as an answer to the moral dilemmas posed by nuclear weapons and.
- An effective defensive system would fundamentally change nuclear policy and strategy.
- SDI affects virtually all issues of defense and arms control.
- A fully-developed SDI could become one of the most expensive single military or civilian programs in the nation's history.

The technological, economic, political and military implications of SDI have been widely discussed, but the important moral questions raised by SDI have not had the visibility they deserve.

The purpose of this booklet is to invite Catholics and all concerned citizens to consider the moral issues raised by SDI.

- Is SDI intended to and will it, in fact, decrease or eliminate our reliance on offensive nuclear weapons?
- Will SDI make nuclear war more or less likely?
- Will SDI improve or hinder progress toward arms control and ultimately progressive disarmament?

- Are the costs of SDI justifiable in light of its likely effectiveness, probable consequences and other unmet military and human needs?

These are some of the moral questions raised and addressed by a committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in a report adopted by the bishops in June of 1988 [See Inset 1]. After careful consideration of these questions, the bishops' committee concluded that, *while some of the officially stated objectives of the SDI program correspond to important themes of their 1983 pastoral on war and peace, proposals to press its deployment do not measure up to key moral criteria.*

This is a prudential judgment; it does not carry the same moral authority as statements on universal moral principles and more formal Church teaching. People of good will can disagree on how best to apply binding moral principles in specific cases. However, this position represents the best judgment of the members of the bishops' committee in their roles as religious leaders, pastors and citizens. It is based on the principles of the pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, and on serious and detailed analysis of the complex issues involved in the SDI proposal.

This booklet is intended to focus greater attention on the moral issues raised by SDI, not just for policymakers and experts but for all concerned citizens, as key decisions about the future of SDI are made in the months ahead.

## SDI: What Is It?

In simple terms, SDI is a research program charged with investigating the technological possibilities of defense against ballistic missiles. But the description cannot remain simple, for even within the Reagan Administration there is a certain pluralism in describing the scope and purpose of SDI. The President's address [of March 23, 1983<sup>1</sup>] described the goal of the program in terms of rendering nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." [Then Defense Secretary] Weinberger described the meaning of the SDI proposal as

## SDI AND THE DETERRENCE REPORT

This booklet draws from a section on SDI (section II. B. Technological Developments) that is part of a report on deterrence prepared over a two-year period by an *ad hoc* committee of bishops. "A Report on *The Challenge of Peace and Policy Developments 1983-1988*" evaluates recent developments in nuclear policy and the arms competition and advocates a series of measures which still need to be undertaken to meet the strict conditions for the moral acceptability of deterrence which were laid out in the bishops' 1983 peace pastoral.

This booklet contains excerpts from the report's description of the SDI program and the surrounding debate; the report's moral analysis of SDI is reproduced in full. The suggested activities, resources list and insets have been included in this booklet to aid you in understanding and responding to the bishops' report.

The bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on the Moral Evaluation of Deterrence included:

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago (chairman) Auxiliary Bishop Angelo Acerra of the Archdiocese of Military Service  
Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit Archbishop Oscar Lipscomb of Mobile  
Archbishop Roger Mahony of Los Angeles Bishop Daniel Reilly of Norwich  
Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul-Minneapolis.

In preparing the deterrence report, the committee heard testimony from more than two dozen experts, including: Amb. Kenneth Adelman, Dr. Harold Brown, Prof. McGeorge Bundy, Dr. Sidney Drell, Lt. General Daniel Graham, Dr. Frank von Hippel, Rev. David Hollenbach, S.J., Mr. Sven Kraemer, Admiral Gene LaRocque, Mr. Robert McNamara, Prof. Joseph Nye, Prof. William O'Brien, Amb. Edward Rowny, Dr. James Schlesinger, Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, Amb. Gerard Smith, Dr. John Steinbruner, Mr. George Weigel.

The full text of the committee's report is available from the Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1312 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005.

“a radical rejection of benign acquiescence in reliance upon the threat of mutual destruction.”<sup>ii</sup> Taken at face value these descriptions depict a program designed *to transcend* a policy of deterrence based on the threat of nuclear retaliation.

Almost from the beginning of the SDI program, however, official statements have included a more modest goal, not to transcend deterrence but *to enhance* deterrence. In 1986 Mr. Weinberger spoke of three justifications for the SDI program: to hedge against a Soviet breakthrough on defensive technologies, to guard against a Soviet breakout of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty, and, finally, "the very real possibility that American science and technology will achieve what appears to some to be an impossible dream."<sup>iii</sup> The first two reasons do not transcend deterrence, the third looks to that goal.

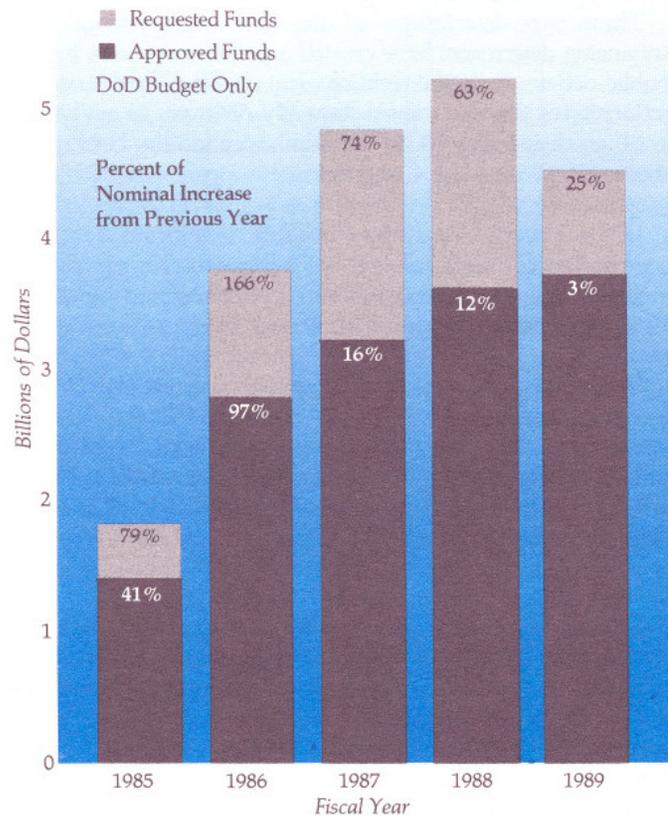
Enhancing deterrence means using defensive systems in a mode which will complicate Soviet planning for a preemptive strike

against American land-based ICBMs [Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles]. The administration case is neither a pure instance of area defense (of population) nor point defense (of missiles) but a mix of partial area and partial point defense designed to forestall Soviet confidence in resorting to a nuclear attack.<sup>iv</sup> [In sum, enhancing deterrence involves a mix of offensive and defensive weapons designed to strengthen the nuclear deterrent, not eliminate it — *Editor's note.*]

These two descriptions of the SDI (transcending and enhancing deterrence) have created a certain confusion in the public debate, since the technological challenge and strategic rationale for the two are substantially different. In spite of a less than clear policy focus, the administration has been quite successful in securing Congressional support for SDI. . . . [See Table 1]

While [the] . . . statistics [in Table 1] indicate a certain congressional reserve about the program, the significant increase

**Table 1: SDI Spending**



Source: "SDI: Progress and Challenges," staff report submitted to Senator Johnston and Senator Proxmire (March 19, 1987); SDIO.

"The SDI program's budget has more than tripled since its inception, it has become the largest military research program in DoD [Department of Defense] — the department's top strategic priority — and its funding level now surpasses the combined technology base funding for the Army, Navy and Air Force."

— "SDI: Progress and Challenges," staff report submitted to Senator Johnston and Senator Proxmire (March 19, 1987).

should not be overlooked; spending rose by 41%, 97% and 16% in nominal terms over a three year period...

In addition to an aggressive legislative program, the administration has expanded the policy framework in its presentation of the SDI. Two speeches by senior State Department officials set the policy rationale and criteria for SDI. In January 1985, then Under Secretary of State Kenneth Dam set forth the "strategic concept" which the administration is using to link its SDI program with its arms control philosophy . . . . [This strategy would begin with radical reductions in nuclear arms in the next ten years followed by a transition to non-nuclear defenses against offensive nuclear weapons, and would eventually lead to the elimination of all nuclear weapons. — Ed.]

In February 1985, Ambassador Paul H. Nitze moved the SDI debate forward by establishing criteria which any deployment would have to satisfy. The Nitze criteria have become a canonical reference in the SDI debate, with both critics and supporters of the proposal appealing to them. Nitze reiterated Dam's argument that the objective of the SDI was "a cooperative effort with the Soviet Union, hopefully leading to an agreed transition toward effective non-nuclear defenses that might make possible the eventual elimination of nuclear weapons."<sup>vi</sup> Movement toward this goal involves *three stages*: the near-term, a transition period and an ultimate phase

1. In the *near-term*, deterrence based on nuclear retaliation will continue to structure the nuclear relationship, but research in defensive technologies and arms control aimed at "radical reductions" in offensive forces would both be pushed vigorously.
2. In the *transitional period* — the key moment — greater reliance will be placed on defensive systems. The *criteria* which must be met in any deployment are
  - technological feasibility
  - survivability
  - cost-effectiveness.<sup>vii</sup>

If defensive systems cannot be deployed in a survivable manner, they become tempting targets and increase strategic

instability. If these systems are not "cost-effective at the margin;" then it will be cheaper for the adversary to build countermeasures. The transition period would be, in Nitze's words, "tricky"; it would require progress in controlling offensive weapons, and it would have to be executed in cooperation with the Soviets.

3. Provided the conditions of the first two periods are met, the *ultimate phase* of the new strategic concept could, in Nitze's view, lead to "the reduction of nuclear weapons down to zero."<sup>viii</sup>

Both the specific proposal of the SDI — a multi-layered defense designed to attack ballistic missiles . . . [See Figure 1: not available –Ed] — and the strategic concept sustaining it have come under criticism. The public debate has focused on the technological feasibility of SDI and its impact on strategic stability and arms control. . . . [See resource list at the end of this booklet for representative analyses of SDI.]

### **SDI: The Moral Argument**

One of the characteristics of the nuclear debate of the 1980s, fostered in part by *The Challenge of Peace*, has been a growing dissatisfaction with the theory and policy of deterrence. The standard doctrine has come under critique from the left and the right of the political spectrum and both have resorted to moral as well as political-strategic arguments to stress the shortcomings of deterrence. The moral case propounded for defensive systems fits into this wider atmosphere of dissatisfaction with deterrence. Both President Reagan and former Secretary Weinberger regularly appeal to the moral motivation and moral quality of the SDI. Supporters of the SDI pick up on this theme, joining a critique of Mutual Assured Destruction theories to an argument about the moral stability which will accompany a defense dominated nuclear relationship.

As bishops, we are interested in the scientific and strategic dimensions of the SDI policy debate, but we are not in a position to

contribute to them. It is precisely the visible role which the moral argument has assumed in the policy arena which draws us into more specific commentary here. The SDI is proposed by some of its supporters as a superior moral answer to the moral dilemmas of the nuclear age analyzed in *The Challenge of Peace*. We seek here to probe the relationship of the moral claims made for SDI and other dimensions of the policy debate [See Inset 2].

### **Intended Objectives**

The case made for the moral superiority of SDI is primarily an ethic of intention; using the just-war ethic, supporters of SDI review the nuclear age, pointing out how classical deterrence doctrine has been willing to abide or endorse threats against innocent populations. In contrast to this posture, a case is made describing the *intended objectives* of SDI: either the transition to a world where the nuclear threat has been negated or at least to a world where the principal targets shift from populations to weapons. Stated at the level of intentionality, the SDI case seeks to capture the moral high ground, undoubtedly contributing to the popularity of the program with the general public.

#### *INSET 2*

### **MORAL CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING SDI**

1. Intended objectives
2. Technological feasibility
3. Risks for strategic stability
4. Economic costs and trade-offs

## Means and Consequences

But the complexity and the stakes of the policy debate on SDI require that the moral argument be pressed beyond its intended objectives. The SDI debate is less a dispute about objectives or motives than it is about means and consequences. To probe the moral content of the effects of pursuing SDI is to raise issues about its risks, costs and benefits.

Giving proper weight to the effects of pursuing SDI moves the focus of the moral argument back from the desirability of freeing the world from the *factual condition* of an assured destruction posture (an objective commended by everyone) to

- the *technological feasibility* of fulfilling this intention,
- the potential risks for *strategic stability* of an offensive-defensive arms competition, and
- the *economic costs* and *trade-offs* which pursuit of SDI will require in a deficit-ridden federal budget.

These categories of feasibility, stability and cost are already prominent in the SDI debate. The point here is to assert that the moral character of SDI cannot be determined apart from these other elements precisely because consequences count in a moral assessment.

## Technological Feasibility

First, while the feasibility argument is primarily a scientific-technological question [See Inset 3: not available –Ed], there are risks associated with pursuing some technological paths:

- risks to the existing arms control regime;
- risks of introducing dimensions of uncertainty into the already delicate political-psychological fabric of deterrence;
- risks that defensive systems can have real or perceived offensive uses;
- finally, risks that some forms of SDI would be ineffective against an adversary's first-strike, but more effective against a retaliatory second-strike, thereby eroding crisis stability.

Assessing these risks — evaluating which are prudent to pursue, which are too high to tolerate — involves a moral as well as a technological judgment. *Precisely because of the number and quality of scientific judgments which have warned against precipitous movement toward SDI, it is necessary to stress the need for continued technological scrutiny and moral restraint concerning a decision which might later be regretted.*

## Risks to Strategic Stability

The second question concerns the impact of the defensive option on strategic stability. The critics of deterrence (*The Challenge of Peace* included) detail several negative factors in the deterrence regime, but the judgments of Vatican II, Pope John Paul II and the pastoral letter also posit a role for deterrence in a world of sovereign states armed with nuclear weapons. While the need to move "beyond deterrence" is asserted by both Pope John Paul II and the U.S. bishops, there is also found in their statements the logic of the 1976 Vatican statement at the United Nations: that a move beyond deterrence should not place the world in a more dangerous condition than our present plight.<sup>ix</sup> Hence, moves beyond deterrence are open to scrutiny. They must be assessed in light of their impact on the basic purpose of deterrence — its role in preventing the use of nuclear weapons.

Assessment of SDI in light of its impact on strategic stability will force the moral argument onto the path of examining the contrasting views of whether the "transition" from assured destruction to common security can be carried off with acceptable risk. Supporters of the SDI argue from the moral and the strategic perspective about the opportunities it provides to transform the nuclear dilemma — to end the mutual threats which constitute the present delicate deterrence balance.<sup>x</sup> These arguments stress the *goal* of the transition.

While this goal is undoubtedly attractive the more compelling moral case presently rests with those who specify the likely risks of an aggressive SDI program at this time:

- The obstacle it poses to effective movement on arms control

[See Inset 4: not available –Ed];

- The possible shift toward offensive use of this defensive system;
- The further "tilt" of the deterrence relationship toward preemptive strategies during the transition period.

No one of these results is a certain consequence of pursuing SDI deployment but the collective danger they pose to the dynamic of deterrence leaves us unconvinced of the merits of proceeding toward deployment of the system. The combination of the technological and the strategic evaluations of the present status of SDI appear to us to promise serious risks and very hypothetical benefits at this time.

### Cost of SDI

The feasibility and strategic stability arguments are central to the policy debate about SDI. Third, the economic argument — the escalating cost of SDI in a time of continuing budget deficits and in a decade which has seen deep cuts in programs for the poor at home and abroad — has particular moral relevance. While *The Challenge of Peace* recognized the need for and moral legitimacy of defense spending, it followed recent papal and conciliar teaching in pressing

#### INSET 5

#### BERNARDIN-O'CONNOR CRITERIA

"If a particular system is found to be of dubious strategic value (i.e., not absolutely necessary to preserve our deterrence posture) and yet is certain to cost large sums of money, then these two criteria lead us to recommend against the system in question:'

— *Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and Archbishop John O'Connor, Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee (June 1984).*

for limits on military spending. The deep divisions in the technological community about the feasibility of SDI, the arguments cited above about the negative impact on strategic stability and the certainty of the costs of SDI bring it within the framework of the Bernardin-O'Connor criteria [See Inset 5]. Specifically, their judgment is that a program which fails to attract a clear consensus on technological-strategic grounds should not be allowed to command resources at a time when other human needs go unfulfilled.

### Conclusion

In summary, our primary purpose in this section has been to dispel the notion that the moral character of SDI can be decided simply by examining it in terms of the objectives (or ends that it intends). These are not the only morally relevant factors that need to be taken into account in rendering a moral judgment about SDI. Judged within an adequate moral frame-work, one that takes into account the relevant moral circumstances surrounding this policy, it is our prudential judgment that *proposals to press deployment of SDI do not measure up to the moral criteria* outlined in this Report. Our judgment about SDI can be summarized in the following statements:

1. Some of the officially stated objectives of the SDI program, *to move away from a long-term reliance on deterrence and to protect civilians and society as a whole*, correspond to key themes of the pastoral letter.
2. The pursuit of these objectives must be carried out within limits which protect other principles of the pastoral letter:
  - *that the framework of arms control agreements and negotiations not be eroded or made more difficult;*
  - *that a new surge of offensive competition not be stimulated as a consequence of introducing defensive proposals;*
  - *that the stability of deterrence not be weakened in an untested attempt to transcend or enhance it;*
  - *that defense spending as a whole not absorb a morally disproportionate percentage of the federal budget.*

## INSET 6

### ABM TREATY

**What it does:** The 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and a 1974 protocol were designed to prevent the deployment of a nationwide defense against *ballistic* nuclear missiles. The Treaty limits Soviet and U.S. missile defenses to 100 land-based interceptors and launchers on *one* site in each country — either the capital or a missile site. Under the Treaty, the Soviet Union maintains the "Galosh" ABM system around Moscow; the United States abandoned a similar defense at Grand Forks, N.D. in 1975 because it was considered ineffective.

**Why it's important:** The U.S. Catholic Bishops have been strong supporters of the ABM Treaty, opposing efforts to cast aside or override it. By limiting missile defenses, the Treaty

- reduces the chance of a new offensive-defensive arms race
- decreases the possibility of a successful first strike
- limits potentially excessive expenditures on defensive systems that could hinder our ability to deal with social and economic needs, especially the growing needs of the poor.
- provides a limited but firm foundation for negotiated reductions in offensive nuclear missiles.

**Reinterpreting the Treaty:** In 1985 the Reagan Administration proposed a *broad* interpretation of the Treaty that would allow more flexibility to develop and test SDI

- *broad interpretation:* would allow *research, development and testing* of technologies not available in 1972 that are space-based, air-based, sea-based or mobile land-based.
- *traditional interpretation:* would allow *only research* on these kinds of new defensive technologies.

The U.S. Catholic Conference supports limits on testing SDI that comply with the traditional interpretation. Under *either* interpretation actual deployment of SDI would require renegotiation of or withdrawal from the ABM Treaty.

3. Observing these limits in the immediate future requires that:

- *SDI be maintained as a research and development program, within the restraints of the ABM Treaty, not pressed to deployment* [See Inset 6];
- *the ABM Treaty should not be cast aside or overridden;*
- *a specific test of each new step in SDI be an assessment of its effects on the offensive-defensive interaction of the arms competition;*
- *clear criteria be established about spending for SDI in relationship to other needs in legitimate defense*

*expenditures (e.g. conventional forces) and particularly in relationship to the basic human needs of the poor in our country and in other nations.*

### What You Can Do

This resource is intended to help Catholics and other concerned citizens reflect on the moral dimensions of SDI and to encourage their participation in the necessary and lively debate over SDI's future. As believers and citizens in this

democracy, we have the opportunity and responsibility to become more informed and express our convictions about the policies that guide our nation. There are many ways individuals can make a contribution to this important policy discussion.

As an individual, you can pray for our leaders, for those who make and carry out policy and for one another that we may face this issue with wisdom, competence and a concern for genuine peace. You can learn more about SDI and the differing points of view, read some of the suggested resources and other publications, or join a group that works on SDI.

You can write your elected representatives on SDI, ask candidates where they stand on it, join a legislative network that helps citizens make their voices heard. You can write your local or diocesan paper sharing your views. In short, you can be an active and informed citizen, registered to vote, informed on the issue and involved in the public debate.

In addition, a parish or community group can organize forums to learn about SDI and its moral dimensions. You can distribute copies of this booklet to others. You can ask your parish and diocesan leaders to include prayers for peace in liturgies, to share the Church's authentic teaching on peace, to encourage parishioners to become informed and involved through parish and community educational and advocacy efforts.

Our nation will be strengthened and the nuclear debate enriched if more of our citizens participate in the fateful decisions about the future of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

## Notes

---

- <sup>i</sup> President Reagan, "Launching the SDI," cited in Z. Brzezinski, ed., *Promise or Peril: The Strategic Defense Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1986), pp. 48-49.
- <sup>ii</sup> W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congress FY1987* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), p. 73.
- <sup>iii</sup> CW. Weinberger, "U.S. Defense Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 64:4 (1986): p. 682. For the Reagan Administration's evaluation of Soviet activities on defensive systems, see, e.g., *Soviet Strategic Defense Programs* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State and Department of Defense, 1985).
- <sup>iv</sup> K. Adelman, Director of U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Testimony before NCCB Ad Hoc Committee on the Moral Evaluation of Deterrence, March 27, 1987.
- <sup>v</sup> K.W. Dam, "Geneva and Beyond: New Arms Control Negotiations," *Department of State Bulletin* 85:2096 (March 1985): p. 39.
- <sup>vi</sup> P.H. Nitze, "On the Road to a More Stable Peace," *Department of State Bulletin* 85:2097 (April 1985): p. 27.
- <sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28
- <sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>ix</sup> "Statement of The Holy See to the United Nations General Assembly," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition (June 17, 1976): p. 9.
- <sup>x</sup> Cf. K.B. Payne and C. Gray, "Nuclear Policy and the Defensive Transition," *Foreign Affairs* 62:4 (1984): pp. 820-842; G. Weigel, "Breaking the Doctrinal Gridlock: Common Security and the Strategic Defense Initiative," *This World* 16 (Winter 1987): pp. 3-22.

---

## Further Information

In addition to the resources cited in the notes, the following materials and organizations provide in-depth analyses of the S.D.I. from a variety of different perspectives. Educational materials are also available from *many* of the organizations listed.

### Books and Articles

Center for International Security and Arms Control, *Strategic Missile Defense: Necessities, Prospects, and Dangers in the Near Term*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 1985).

Council on Economic Priorities, *Star Wars: The Economic Fallout*, (Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing, 1988).

Griener, George, S.J., "Star Wars and Moral Choices," *America* 158:7 (February 20, 1988), pp. 182-186.

Guerrier, Steven and Thompson, Wayne, eds. *Perspectives on Strategic Defense*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1987).

Mische, Patricia M. *Star Wars and the State of Our Souls: Deciding the Future of Planet Earth*. (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985).

National Campaign to Save the ABM Treaty, *Briefing Book on the ABM Treaty and Related Issues* (1988).

Philadelphia Archdiocesan Commission for World Justice and Peace, *Star Wars: A Fateful Choice* (1987).

*The President's Strategic Defense Initiative* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1985)

Tirman, John, ed., *Empty Promise: The Growing Case Against S.D.I.* (Boston: Beacon Books, 1986)

### Organizations

*Arms Control Association*, 11 DuPont Circle, NW, Washington, D.C. 20036 (202) 797-6450.

*Federation of American Scientists*, 307 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20002 (202) 546-3300.

---

*High Frontier*, 2800 Shirlington Road, Suite 405, Arlington, Virginia 22206 (703) 671-411.

*Network*, 806 Rhode Island Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20018 (202) 526-4070.

*Pax Christi USA*, 348 East 10th Street, Erie, PA 16503 (814) 453-4955.

*SANE/Freeze*, 711 G Street, S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003 (202) 546-7100.

*The Strategic Defense Initiative Office*, The Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301 (202) 695-8740

*Union of Concerned Scientists*, 26 Church Street, Cambridge, MA 02238 (617) 547-5552.

Copyright © 1988 by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Inc.; Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.