"Star Wars" Revisited: An Analysis of Ronald Reagan’s Rhetoric On The Strategic Defense Initiative

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Abstract

Ronald Reagan has been one of the more popular and beloved presidents in American history, and a number of polls and surveys continue to laud him as one of the greatest political figures of all time, especially when it comes to foreign policy communication. Thus, it is only natural that his speeches have often been the subject of academic discussion. This study analyzes President Ronald Reagan’s discourse advocating the Strategic Defense Initiative of the early 1980s (otherwise famously known as “Star Wars”) by focusing on the use of language, motivational appeals and speaker’s character and addresses how he rhetorically justified the apparent change in American foreign policy. The study also illustrates how he was able to deal with such sensitive issue as nuclear weapon and come out with highly persuasive speeches for the public during the Cold War era. The timing of the study is highly intriguing because of the program’s rekindled interest in popular culture as of late, especially with the highly touted screening of Star Wars: The Force Awakens, the latest installment in the film franchise.

keywords: Star Wars, SDI, Ronald Reagan, Cold War, Soviet Union

I. Introduction

It has been over 30 years since the then U.S. President Ronald Reagan first proposed erecting a space-based shield to defend the United States from a Soviet nuclear missile attack. The 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), often dubbed “Star Wars” [1], was quietly put to rest when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, ending the Cold War nuclear arms race between the two superpowers. However, not only does the Strategic Defense Initiative still remain one of the most memorable rhetoric of Reagan’s era, it also lingers on as one of the instances in which a speech became something of a popular cultural content.

In 1995, Mikhail Gorbachev offered his views of Reagan’s role in ending the Cold War by saying, “If there was one vital factor in the ending of the Cold War, it was Ronald Reagan’s decision to go ahead with the Strategic Defense Initiative” [2]. What Reagan called the Strategic Defense Initiative, also known as “Stars Wars,” is in many ways the quintessential Reagan
program. It really appealed to Americans not only because of Reagan's charismatic and likeable character but also his brilliant use of language and persona. Still, there are two distinctively opposite views when it comes to assessing the Strategic Defense Initiative. Some see it simply as a joke that could not be realized while others see it as an enhanced defense mechanism, even in the field of academia [3].

Despite criticism, debates, and controversies that surrounded the SDI, it is a common sense that the U.S. now holds a significant advantage in the area of advanced missile defense systems, thanks to extensive research and trials-and-errors. It is hard to argue against the fact that the so-called "Star Wars" played an integral part in making the U.S. the undisputed world leader in missile defense and development because many of the obtained technological insights and blueprints were transferred to subsequent follow-up programs [4].

However, it was not just technological possibility and probability that yielded the SDI such a powerful impact. It was Ronald Reagan's brilliant foreign policy campaign and discourse that gave the program something of an aura. According to Zarefsky, advocates often offer descriptions that function strategically by "redefining phenomena without acknowledging that a redefinition is taking place and a new point of view is being promoted" [5]. This concept is what he calls "argument by definition" [5]. He illustrated that the strategic use of naming can advance an advocate's values and beliefs without the explicit defense. Arguments by definition are "not claims supported by reasons and intended to justify adherence by critical listeners. Instead, they are simply proclaimed as if they were undisputable facts" [5]. Ronald Reagan was the master of such a strategy, and his speeches and actions on nuclear policy are fine examples to support the Zarefsky's idea.

The study aims to illustrate how President Reagan was able to deal with such sensitive issue as nuclear weapon in his own right and come out with persuasive speeches for the public during the times of the Cold War. In addition, it addresses how he rhetorically justified the apparent change in American foreign policy because Reagan partisans consider his dramatic move made the Soviets nervous and the next phase of the arms race would be waged in areas where the U.S. held a decisive technological edge, regardless of its realization [6]. In order to close-examine Reagan's discourse on the SDI, the study employs the evaluation tool first proposed by Tim Burchers in 2005.

II. Method

As briefly noted above, this study analyzes the Reagan Administration's discourses
advocating the Strategic Defense Initiative—the initial speech on March 23, 1983 and two more follow-up speeches in October 1986 and December 1987—by focusing on the use of language, motivational appeals, and speaker’s character—the three evaluation tools of persuasion developed by Borchers [7]—and examines how the policy turned out to be a successful argument for President Reagan and the United States’ international relations.

Since Borchers’s evaluation and assessment method is relatively new and only few previous research have utilized it for discourse analysis, it will lend a new theoretical perspective for future studies and suggest a groundwork to build them upon. Before the close examination, the literature review briefly examines past research that focused on the effectiveness of Reagan’s rhetoric on the SDI as well as the evaluation of his speeches. In order to analyze and assess Reagan’s speeches and to support main arguments and assertions, the main sources of the study drew quotes and information from books on the SDI and Reagan, academic journals, popular periodicals, and major daily publications such as USA Today and Wall Street Journal.

This study is significant in several ways. First of all, from the characteristic perspective, Reagan has generally come to be viewed in a more positive light. A number of recent polls reveal that Reagan is the best president since World War II—one of the examples being two-thirds of Americans looking back favorably on Reagan’s presidency [8]—and the ongoing re-evaluation of him is ubiquitous even after his passing. Second of all, from the social and political perspective, though it was never fully developed or deployed, the research and technologies of the SDI paved the way for some anti-ballistic missile systems of today. As Reiss argued, the SDI was probably “the most important new military program of the 1980s” [9]. Especially with Vladimir Putin’s current regime in Russia, the possibility of a new Cold War era, and even North Korea’s continued nuclear threat, there has been a renewed interest in the SDI as of late. Lastly, from the cultural perspective, because of public awareness of the program and its controversial nature, the SDI has been the subject of many fictional and pop culture references, from popular movies such as Robocop (1987) to best-selling fictional novels such as Tom Clancy’s The Cardinal of the Kremlin (1986) to Whitley Strieber’s Warday (1984). However, it is the film franchise Star Wars, in which the policy’s nickname was named after, that goes hand in hand when discussing the SDI. It is much evident nowadays especially with the recent release of its newest installment, The Force Awakens (2015).

III. Literature Review

In one of the very first studies conducted on Reagan’s discourse on the SDI, Rushing argued
that the original speech given in March 1983 is best understood when viewed as an interdependent part of a culturally evolving mythic hole. That is, the SDI creates some kind of illusion with the use of such word as “Star Wars,” and Reagan succeeded in persuading the public by subordinating technical reasoning to the purpose of avoiding nuclear holocaust. She concluded that Reagan “creates a dramatic irony in which the role of science to be defied but actually delimited in comparison to his own role as playwright” [10]. She also argued that Reagan dominates technical discourse on the SDI with his own non-technical rhetoric and is aided rhetorically by the fact that his purpose is moral and specific whereas that of science is amoral and amorphous, and in the end, he turns from a “dreamer” into a “visionary” [10].

Lewis posited that similar themes recur in the scholarly evaluation of Reagan’s rhetoric, claiming that while his effectiveness is widely recognized “for his strategic prowess and for his ability to inspire American public” [11], others find his success problematic because of manipulation of language and style to make himself attractive. He said that story-telling is fundamental to the relationship between Reagan and his audience, and he uses it to direct his policies, ground his explanations, and inspire his audiences, and “the dominance of narrative helps to account for the variety of reactions to his rhetoric” [11]. In addition, as in the case of the SDI, simplifying difficult vocabularies has been a continuing theme of Reagan’s rhetoric, and also his justification for the SDI in the 1985 State of the Union Address provides a good example of the ways in which “a moral emphatic can influence public argument” [11]. Lewis concluded that whereas Reagan does not deny the SDI’s expense, he invokes the goal of saving lives by justifying the ultimate goal of the program.

Goodnight analyzed several speeches of Reagan’s rhetoric, including the original “Star Wars” speech, by noting their contributions to the emergence of the first Reagan administration’s rhetorical posture. He said that the discourse “promoted military preparedness of America and impelled the counter-rhetoric that questioned the nature and functions of military power in the nuclear age” [12], and the Reagan administration used rhetoric effectively to enlighten the public. Specifically, regarding the original “Star Wars” speech, Goodnight said that Reagan sought to harness the power of science to a new dream of peace and security by “challenging the prevailing assumption that there can be no defense against nuclear weapons” [12]. He said that more than a visionary dream, the discourse achieves great power because it “carries to the archaic world much of contemporary concerns and redirects the efforts of the present toward preparing for a world to come” [12].

More recently in 2008, Howell examined Reagan’s rhetoric of public diplomacy surrounding the Reykjavik Summit in 1986 (the follow-up speech to the original 1983 discourse) and argued
that Reagan used SDI to encourage Mikhail Gorbachev toward liberalization and
democratization of the Soviet Union, particularly in the area of human rights. Howell also
contended that the rhetoric was fashioned in the context of international politics, and Reagan
used "the Soviet Union's human rights practices as justification for deep distrust of Soviet
leaders" [13]. More importantly, Howell argued that Reagan used his rhetoric in an effort to
persuade Gorbachev that until there the Soviets did not try harder, there would be little or no
progress toward an end to the arms race. He said, "SDI represented both a symbol of the
West's mistrust of the Soviet Union and a tool of public diplomacy to pressure the Soviet
Union to change its human rights policies and practices" [13]. Howell concluded that the
Reykjavik Summit was so much more than the SDI summit.

IV. Reagan's Rhetorical Strategies and Analysis

1. The Use of Metaphors

Borchers noted, "Persuaders often use metaphors to compare things that are apparently
different yet have something in common. Metaphors are persuasive because they help the
audience see the relationship between something new and something they already know" [7]. A
meta-analysis conducted by Sopory and Dillard revealed that metaphors "lead to great attitude
change than literal language and there is high degree of confidence about metaphor's positive
effect on attitude" [14]. Schiappa also argued, "The suggestive power of naming is magnified
when it involves the use of metaphor" [15].

A number of metaphors are employed by Reagan to name and describe the Strategic Defense
Initiative and other issues surrounding it. Even before the initial speech to introduce the
Strategic Defense Initiative to the public, he had already made the speech to classify the Soviet
Union as "evil empire," which is a classic implementation of metaphor. In a similar way, the
terms used to describe the Strategic Defense Initiative, such as "piece shield" and "Star Wars,"
gave the audiences a better understanding of the program and helped them identify with it.

Schiappa contended, "The most persuasive metaphors are those drawn from ordinary
language. Ordinary language often exhibits a high degree of denotative conformity and thus
embodies the common sense of a community of language users, which includes the judgments,
attitudes, and feelings associated with certain words" [15]. This may be one of the reasons the
metaphor of "Star Wars" was so effective to the American public. Naturally, when the Strategic
Defense Initiative was promptly renamed with the metaphor term "Star Wars," it was
obvious those fancy two words would capture the minds of people more easily and effectively.

"The popular word, the oral word, the name of the game as pronounced by popular assent, pronounced daily by lips of thousands, was the right word after all," Havelock explained [16]. He also said, "Never mind the literate formula carefully created by the experts to translate what was actually going to happen into something else. It was going to be a war, or several wars, fought with appropriate weaponry, up among the stars" [16].

Ritchie asserted that even a new metaphor, if it strikes the hearer or reader as particularly apt, may quickly become "textualized," as in the case of "Star Wars." Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative seemed immediately reasonable in evoking a sense of "Hollywood-originated fantasy" [17]. Cannon also contended that "The influence of movies is part of a broader tendency by Reagan to define his reality in terms of stories, both fiction and nonfiction" [18]. Reagan offered Americans the dream of a defensive system which would provide an invincible shield against missile attacks by introducing a fancy concept in a form of metaphor linking it to the famous movie franchise. Reagan justified the reasoning for the development of the Strategic Defense Initiative by addressing it was a program designed for defense, not offense, primarily through the use of positive metaphors.

On the other hand, he illustrated the nuclear weapons as "impotent and obsolete." This was in line with his "evil empire" name-calling on the Soviet Union a few months prior to the introduction of the Strategic Defense Initiative. Naylor pointed that the 1983 "evil empire" denouncement characterized "the most vitriolic attack ever waged by American president against a foreign nation since the end of World War II" [19]. Ivie also explained that the recurrence of the savagery metaphor is "Reagan's principal means of keeping before the public a perspective from which to see the 'facts' of Soviet 'mischief'" [20].

With the metaphor implying America as the savior of the world, the lover of peace, and the defenders of justice and the Soviet Union as the source of world conflict and the threat to world peace, Reagan succeeded in persuading the public. In his State of the Union Address in 1986, he again referred to the Strategic Defense Initiative as "roof" protecting a family from "rain," which obviously referred to the Soviet Union's nuclear threat. A consistent theme throughout the discussion of the Strategic Defense Initiative was the focus on "defense" against the enemy's attack.

Reagan's use of metaphor was highlighted in his addresses after the Reykjavik Summit on October 13, 1986, and then again after the Washington Summit on December 10, 1987, which both included the lengthy discussions on the Strategic Defense Initiative with Gorbachev. In Reykjavik, the terms "insurance policy" and "security guarantee" were used to describe the
Strategic Defense Initiative. Only a year later, in Washington, he used more figurative metaphors, such as “cries of children,” “the miracle of the season,” and “chosen people in a promised land,” as an effort to portray the United States as a positive force in world peace. Reagan said, “Because Americans have been given the gift of democracy and freedom, it is our responsibility to assist other nations” [21]. According to Miller, the metaphor we use determines “our attitude toward the facts” [22], and Reagan’s use of metaphors clearly directed the attention away from any other point of view possible. Scholpp summarized the efficiency of Reagan’s use of metaphor by saying, “The metaphors employed by Reagan to name and describe the Strategic Defense Initiative over the last six years of his administration did nothing to change the perception of the Strategic Defense Initiative as population defense” [15].

2. Calling on Motivational Appeals

According to Borchers, motivational appeals “call upon the emotions, needs, and values of audience members” [7]. He also explained that motivational appeals are “designed to elicit some feelings in the audience, which will result in some kind of socially constructed response from the audience” [7]. That is, as persuaders try to build relationships with audience members, they appeal to the feelings of the audience. In his speeches surrounding the Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan focused on the audience’s emotions, needs, and values to address why the United States needed the Strategic Defense Initiative. Fisher asserted, “Presidential heroes are made known to us ultimately through their capacity to articulate the inarticulate dreams of the people, giving them both a better vision of themselves and a way of realizing it” [23]. The personality of Ronald Reagan always seemed to have been driven and influenced by an optimistic faith in American utopian dreams, and his fantasy was given a big boost by the public willing to follow the President’s vision. Ivis said, “Commonplaces and everyday analogies infuse his enthymemes with rhetorical force by identifying the speaker with the audience’s beliefs and values” [20].

For instance, in Reagan’s initial speech, he offered a trenchant view on what the American public needs. “It’s up to us, in our time, to choose and choose wisely between the hard but necessary task of preserving peace and freedom and the temptation to ignore our duty and blindly hope for the best while the enemies of freedom grow stronger day by day” [24]. Reagan brought safety needs on the table and asked the American public for its approval on the Strategic Defense Initiative. Throughout the speech, Reagan tried to assure Americans that the country would be safe from the Communists and the Strategic Defense Initiative could
come to realization with their help.

In addition to "needs," he also focused on "values" of the United States and its people. One of Reagan's biggest strengths comes from his career as a beloved screen actor, and his persuasive appeals lies in "respective visions of the American Dream and the people" [23]. As Reagan addressed to the nation, he constantly used the positive terms, such as "peace," "freedom," "justice," "democracy," and "stability" as opposed to the Soviet Union's threat. Edelmeyer claimed, "each term characterizes both the United States and its foreign policy goals and often the terms are used interchangeably" [21]. That is, Reagan framed democracy, freedom, and peace as the core values unique to America and its people.

Borchere contended that our belief systems "allow us to actively interpret emotional situations in which we find ourselves" [7]. The language use of Reagan's speech also focuses on "togetherness" to stir emotions of the audience. In the Summit with Gorbachev in Washington in 1987 while discussing the Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan made the following comments. "I have always regarded you, the American people, as full participants in our discussions. It may surprise Mr. Gorbachev to discover that all this time there has been a third party in the room with us" [25]. Reagan, the great communicator, understood the role of the American public in this issue and brought their attention. Not only that, in his speeches, he used "we" instead of "I" and "our" instead of "my" in order to build a sense of togetherness. Reagan saw American people as catalysts of freedom and peace and active sources of involvement in the Strategic Defense Initiative.

Kiewe and Houck analyzed Reagan's rhetoric style as follows; "With minimal factual figures and limited real progress in certain areas, Reagan created a dramatic narrative which reflected a rhetorical vision he hoped to share with America" [26]. This is consistent with the observation of Fisher that posited "Reagan's prophecy was sparkling with expansion, free rein, and restored glory. He foretold a future that was as certain as America's past; America could not only go back, but by making the past the future, America would solve all of her problems" [23].

Reagan's storytelling in his initial speech motivates the public's active involvement in the Strategic Defense Initiative and his concern for nuclear war from a historic perspective. Reagan said, "We're launching an effort which holds the promise of changing the course of human history" [24]. This phrase falls within the point of view of Bork on Reagan's involvement on the project. She said, "Reagan's conception of the Strategic Defense Initiative tapped into America's historical self-image of innocence and destiny. As a purely technological solution to the arms race, it called forth historical images of American ingenuity in the face of
inseparable odds" [27]. In other words, Reagan sought to find approval from the American public by linking its self-image from a historical standpoint and stressed that the U.S. might be in a situation that might change the course of not just American history but world history.

3. Reagan's Personality as Credibility Source

Borchers discussed credibility factor for persuaders by borrowing Aristotle's notion, "Who the persuader is can cause audiences to be persuaded" [7]. Credibility is a judgment the audience makes about the persuader. "The listener's impression of the accuracy and credibility of the speaker's statement may be affected by his or her impression of the information available to the speaker, the speaker's motivation, the speaker's degree of accountability, and the speaker's goals when forming his or her belief" [28]. Then, much of the Strategic Defense Initiative's effectiveness is very much due to Reagan's indisputable personality and charisma as a credible speaker.

Schroder said that Reagan's ability to connect with the American people earned him the laudatory moniker "The Great Communicator" [29]. Reagan is a speaker who displays the attributes of what Aristotle calls as "ethos" and has been the subject of numerous communication analyses. Lewis said, "Reagan uses story-telling to direct his policies, ground his explanations, and inspire his audience, and the dominance of narrative helps to account for the variety of reactions to his rhetoric" [21].

Reagan, with his larger than life popularity stemming from his experiences as an actor and the Governor of California, was always a trustworthy figure when it came to credibility. As briefly noted in the previous section, Reagan was the people's president. "In so many ways Reagan as President continues to cultivate the ethos of good sense and goodwill that the public desires of its leaders," said Ives [20]. Fisher (1982) also summed up the credibility of Reagan by praising, "It is clear that there is a heroic aura surrounding Reagan's rhetoric" [23].

So, how does the credibility factor specifically apply to his stance concerning the Strategic Defense Initiative? Troy contended that it showcased Ronald Reagan at his best, as a bold and idealistic visionary who truly wanted to free the world from the nuclear threat [30]. Goodnight, in his analysis of the initial address of the Strategic Defense Initiative, mentioned that his position enhanced the idea of a space shield. He illustrated, "Those who oppose the administration have but the resources of partisanship, while the President presents himself as one who has worked with expert advice and risen above the defense debate with a plan of action that extends beyond it" [12]. In addition, he observed that "Visionaries can sometimes
employ rhetoric to bring into view the close of a pattern of life that seems ingrained in the order of things, and to announce the coming of a new era" [12]. Reagan's visionary, yet very wise character in the case of the Strategic Defense Initiative is best defined by Rushing, who said, "Part of Reagan's political skills is he seems to grasp widespread yearning for holistic phase and covert to convert these hopes and dreams to his own political advantage" [10].

Reagan himself took both the full credit and the blame for the project. Reagan passionately maintained the position that the Strategic Defense Initiative was his idea to begin with. Cannon pointed out that taking responsibility was Reagan's way of reacting to criticisms of his knowledge or effectiveness. That is, beyond the rhetoric, Reagan's deep personal commitment and dedication to the Strategic Defense Initiative revealed itself in plenty of his actions in the course of its creation and evolution [18]. Choy noted on Reagan's credibility factor by saying, "Evidently, Reagan's personal actions and intents played a substantial role in establishing and maintaining the Strategic Defense Initiative" [31]. In addition, he posited, "Most historians would likely agree that the Strategic Defense Initiative could not have reared its head with the same vigor in the 1980s without the driving force of Reagan's personal dedication to the cause" [31].

In the initial speech in 1983, Reagan said, "We and our allies have succeeded in preventing nuclear war for more than three decades," and added, "I've become more and more deeply convinced that the human spirit must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence" [24]. He tried to reach out to the audiences by defending his position as a peacekeeper and did not serve personal interests but asked for the world peace instead. Goodnight further examined Reagan's credibility factor by saying, "By contrasting faith in American achievement and technological ability with suspicions of foreign powers and diplomacy, by questioning the profoundly immoral and unpatriotic act of revenge necessary to make deterrence credible, and by identifying concrete means to actualize the possibility of defense, Reagan tapped into a reservoir of a public support that enabled him to put the nuclear weapons buildup into a favorable perspective" [12].

After all, the poll results from Public Opinion Quarterly in 1986 indicated the public was, indeed, in favor of Reagan and his administration. Graham and Kremer reported that eight out of 10 questions which asked about the generic feasibility of developing a defense against nuclear weapons found a majority of the population believing that the United States or its scientists could develop such a defense and supporting the plan [32]. In addition, in 1987, the White House polls showed that 71 percent of Americans supported the SDI after Gorbachev acknowledged that Moscow, too, was researching missile defenses [35].
IV. Conclusion

The study has examined the symbolic resources utilized by Reagan to characterize his anti-Soviet policies as well as vision for “Star Wars.” Even though there may be a lot more strategies employed by Reagan in his speeches, this study concentrated on the pattern of his rhetorical efforts based on metaphors, motivational appeals, and the speaker’s credibility as the tools of assessment. Taken together, these factors all allowed “Star Wars” to reign over American strategic policy for some time during the Reagan presidency.

A presidential persona incarnates the people’s voice to lend a further note of rationality to the “heroic call for strong America” [20]. Then, it is very fitting that Reagan bought into the SDI at a time he was “the most popular politician on the planet” [34]. While the well-documented signs of struggle and hassle over the issue do not prove whether the idea was right or wrong, the result was that the SDI, as far as the effectiveness of the rhetoric is concerned, became one of the most popular foreign policy of the U.S. in its history.

As intricate as the plan was, the reason for the Strategic Defense Initiative’s effectiveness may have been a combination of many different factors as well, but Kaplan wrote, “If Reagan hadn’t been president—if Jimmy Carter or Walter Mondale had defeated him or if Reagan had died and George H. W. Bush taken his place—Gorbachev almost certainly would not have received the push or reinforcement that he needed. Those other politicians would have been too traditional, too cautious, to push such radical proposals, such as zero nukes and the Strategic Defense Initiative” [35]. In other words, Reagan’s presence alone played an indispensable role in convincing the Soviets, the American public, and possibly the entire world, eventually marking the end of the Cold War era.

Today, the American public is much more likely to be skeptical and cynical about such a system than it was over the course of the original Reagan proposal. Current world events and the level of concerns about nuclear proliferation are drastically different from what they were some 30 years ago, and more importantly, Reagan is no longer in the office and no longer with us. Nevertheless, how to nurture or stifle the hope for the future may be determined best by looking back on the efforts to launch and sustain the Strategic Defense Initiative during its 10-year existence. As Hannaford and Hobbs evaluated, Reagan saw the Strategic Defense Initiative as a purposeful, humane effort to trigger the end to the arms race whatever the consensus may suggest. “Had he not had the determination to go forward with it in the face of heavy criticism, we might still be in the midst of the Cold War” [36].
References


