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A White House Report Argues for 'Star Wars'

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 3 — The White House issued its first public report today on President Reagan's proposal to develop a defense against nuclear missiles, arguing that the time had come to move away from reliance on weapons of mass destruction to deter a nuclear war.

While not departing from testimony given before Congress this year by an array of Pentagon officials, the report seemed clearly aimed at the general public rather than at expert audiences.

In the foreword to the glossy, 10-page brochure, President Reagan wrote that "we must seek another means of deterring war. It is both militarily and morally necessary."

The report, using language that avoided technical intricacies, reviewed the background of what the Administration calls President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, which has become popularly known as "Star Wars" since he announced it in a March 1983 speech.

In his introduction, Mr. Reagan reiterated major themes of that speech, saying the basic assumptions behind trying to avoid nuclear war through mutual vulnerability "are being called into question." New technologies and a Soviet military buildup have made the quest for defense against nuclear-armed missiles more urgent and success more possible, he said.

"I would ask you to remember that the quality of our future is at stake and to reflect on what we are trying to achieve — the strengthening of our ability to preserve the peace while shifting away from our current dependence upon the threat of nuclear retaliation," the President wrote.

A White House spokesman said today that the report was reviewed before publication by a number of executive bureaus, including the Defense Department, the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency.

The report seemed to minimize the intense debate in Congress and among scientists outside the Government by maintaining that "the Joint Chiefs of Staff, many respected scientists, and other experts believe that, with firm leadership and adequate funding," the project could succeed in achieving a workable antimissile system for population defense.

"The President's document is probably timed to influence two upcoming events: the Geneva arms control talks and the presentation of the Administration's defense budget," said Senator

Larry Pressler, a South Dakota Republican who has opposed the development of space-based weaponry. "The man on the street is being led to believe there is something that will make nuclear weapons obsolete, but just the opposite may be true," he added, maintaining that "Star Wars" research could accelerate the arms race.

In a section titled "Assertions and Facts," intended to counter what the report says are "misleading claims and charges" made by critics of the President's proposal, the report contended that any judgments about the project's feasibility "are highly premature."

The report denied that the project would unilaterally accelerate the arms race, emphasizing that "the Soviets are already hard at work on advanced technologies" such as lasers and other directed-energy weapons.

Regarding charges that the Strategic Defense Initiative may someday violate the 1972 international treaty that limits antimissile systems, the report noted that the treaty "provides for possible amendments." If the current research program leads to development of useful hardware, "we would then address the question of availing ourselves of these procedures in order to modify the treaty," the report added.

The report also denied that the President's program would mean the militarization of space. "The 'militarization of space' began in the late 1950's," the report argued, "when the first Soviet ballistic missiles were tested."