

Statement by Deputy Press Secretary for Foreign Affairs Djerejian on the Strategic Modernization Program

June 3, 1986

The President sent a message to Congress today that called upon the Congress to fully support his budget request for strategic modernization and the Strategic Defense Initiative. The President views this message as a companion piece to his recent statement on interim restraint with respect to the SALT treaty limitation on strategic weapons.

The President noted that over the past 5 years, with the support and cooperation of the Congress, we have made substantial progress in rebuilding our deterrent capabilities. We can be justifiably proud of what we have accomplished by working together, but much more remains to be done. While recognizing the progress we have made, we must be clear that the advanced systems which have been proceeding through intensive development programs during the past 5 years are only now beginning to be deployed. Those unfamiliar with the sequence of research, development, and deployment all too often assume that our commitment to build a new system results in its immediate deployment. This error may explain the view held by some that we have now accomplished enough in restoring our strategic capabilities and that we can begin to cut those programs significantly. In fact, the real benefits of our strategic modernization efforts will be realized only if we complete the tasks that we have begun with the research and development phase.

We recognized in 1981, when we began to modernize our defenses in response to the Soviet buildup, that we had to make strategic modernization our first priority. We have done so, and it has paid clear dividends. Our strategic programs have been models of management efficiency where we have kept them stable and on track. Internationally, our progress has paved the way to negotiations now in progress, where for the first time the prospect of deep nuclear arms reductions is before us. As our negotiators in Geneva seek equitable and verifiable agreements, they are mindful that we have no more urgent task in preserving peace and freedom than the prevention of nuclear war. The strategic programs now before the Congress represent a vital foundation to this search for a stable peace. They are designed to restore and strengthen our traditional approach to deterrence while we explore through our Strategic Defense Initiative the feasibility of harnessing advanced technologies in order to usher in a safer world.

We must also always remember that maintaining a strong nuclear deterrent does more than prevent nuclear war. Strong U.S. deterrent forces also contribute significantly to preventing major conventional aggression. In calculating what they call "the correlation of forces," the Soviet political and military leadership are ever mindful of the state of the nuclear balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result, a strong U.S. strategic deterrent decreases the threat of any Soviet aggression and serves as the vital background which discourages Soviet conventional attack upon our allies or our interests abroad. A weak nuclear deterrent, leaving the Soviet Union with superior nuclear forces, could have the opposite effect. It could invite the Soviet Union to rely on such an advantage and to use conflict or coercion to achieve their objectives. Our strategic programs provide, therefore, a beneficial effect which far outweighs the less than 15 percent of the defense budget they consume. They are affordable, they are vital, and they respond to an increasing threat.

In considering our proposed funding for strategic programs, the President asks each and every Member of Congress to consider the stakes involved. The Congress can proceed along the path of strategic modernization we charted 5 years ago and strengthen thereby our ability to deter both conventional and nuclear coercion or aggression. It can permit us to proceed as quickly and efficiently as possible

through the Strategic Defense Initiative to determine how we can create a safer world and ensure peace and stability for the long term. Alternatively, by cutting here and trimming there, Congress can stretch programs, thereby delaying scientific results; postponing the deployment of capabilities, which we all agree are necessary; and as a further penalty, increasing programmatic costs. The President knows which choice the American people would make.

Thus, we come to one of those unique crossroads of history where nations decide their fate. Our choices are clear: We can hold firm to our policies of modernizing to maintain our deterrent strength that has preserved the peace for 40 years, or we can shrink from the challenge by offering a host of excuses. We can strengthen the hand of our negotiators in Geneva in their efforts to achieve deep, equitable, and verifiable reductions; or, by unilaterally reducing our forces, we can make a mockery of the only process that leads us towards meaningful arms control.

The President is confident that the Congress will therefore join with him to protect the strategic modernization programs that make these negotiations possible. The Soviets are well informed regarding congressional support for our modernization programs. If they detect a collapse of American resolve, we will see no movement in the negotiations because the Soviets will know they are better off by letting the Congress reduce our programs unilaterally rather than by engaging in meaningful negotiations which would result in both U.S. and Soviet systems being reduced on an equitable and verifiable basis. By standing together to protect these few programs that form the foundation of our national security, we will send a clearly different message. The world knows that there is no more powerful force than an America united and determined to protect its freedom. That is the message we must send forth to pave the way for peace in the years ahead.

Note: Edward P. Djerejian read the statement to reporters at 12:20 p.m. in the Briefing Room at the White House.

<http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/60386d.htm>