GENERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE
On Arms Control and Disarmament

October 25, 1985

Dear Jay,

Attached is an honestly conducted poll on SDI. In short, it confirms statistically what we already knew intuitively -- the real people of this country strongly support SDI.

Best regards,

[Signature]

William Graham
The Committee on the Present Danger today released the results of a comprehensive, national, in-depth poll on "U.S. Public Attitudes Toward the Strategic Defense Initiative and the U.S. Defense Effort." The poll was conducted for the Committee earlier this month by the independent polling organization of Penn & Schoen Associates.¹

The results of the nationwide, scientific sample of 1,000 Americans showed overwhelming public support of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). There was also an overwhelming public conviction that the SDI should not be sacrificed in arms control negotiations for cuts in the Soviet Union's offensive nuclear arsenal, and further, that the U.S. should proceed with the research and development phases of SDI.

The poll found that a substantial majority of Americans see the SDI as "a way to limit the usefulness of nuclear weapons" and would support using it in the United States if it could be developed. By a 2 to 1 margin, Americans believe the SDI will enhance, rather than harm, the chances for arms control. Further, Americans reject the notion that SDI will make the world less safe by almost a 4 to 1 margin.

¹Penn & Schoen Associates is a highly respected, independent, national polling organization which has conducted polls for, among others, former Vice President Walter Mondale, Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, Mayor Edward Koch of New York City and Mayor Marion Barry of the District of Columbia.
By more than a 2 to 1 margin, Americans believe the Soviets are outspending the United States on military forces, and a strong majority (72%) believe that spending on defense should not be cut or should be increased. This is true even though the public believes current defense expenditures are vastly greater — on average more than 4 times greater — than they actually are. Less than 1 in 4 Americans favor cutting defense expenditures and of those, 62% do so "because of the pressures of the budget deficit" rather than "because our defenses are in such good shape."

The poll further shows that a strong plurality of Americans believe the Soviets have both nuclear and overall military superiority over the United States. The poll also shows that the public believes the U.S. is spending far more on nuclear weapons and far less on conventional weapons than is actually the case.

Among the poll's specific findings:

-- 73% favor deployment of an SDI system in the United States.

-- 57% see the SDI "as a way to limit the usefulness of nuclear weapons" rather than as a "new weapon."

-- By a margin of 77% to 13%, Americans reject the Soviet demand to halt the U.S. SDI program in exchange for cuts in the Soviet offensive nuclear arsenal.

-- 76% believe the Soviet proposal to hold direct arms control negotiations with Britain and France is merely an attempt "to divide the West."

-- 72% support current or greater levels of U.S. defense spending.

-- By 55% to 22%, Americans believe the Soviet Union is outspending the United States on defense.

A fuller analysis of the poll's findings and copies of the complete results may be obtained at the Committee's offices at 905 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006. Contact: David J. Trachtenberg, Senior Defense Analyst, (202) 628-2409.

(Note: The materials referred to in the above paragraph are attached.)
To: The Committee on the Present Danger

From: Penn and Schoen Associates

Re: Poll findings on the SDI and the U.S. defense effort

DATE: October 18, 1985

SUMMARY

The poll of 1000 U.S. residents conducted between October 6th and October 9th, 1985 shows that, with the November summit meeting coming up, Americans are strongly in favor of the Strategic Defense Initiative and do not support a trade-off between the SDI and cuts in Soviet nuclear weapons. Seventy-eight percent believe the United States should go ahead with the research and development phases of the SDI and 77% reject the Soviet demand for an SDI trade-off.

In addition, Americans overwhelmingly support the deployment of the SDI in the United States. If the system can be developed, seventy-three percent say it should be used in the U.S.

The poll further shows that Americans do not think the SDI, contrary to arguments raised by its critics, will hurt the
chances for arms control. Sixty-four percent believe that the SDI will either increase the chances for arms control or have no effect. Only 19% think the SDI will hurt arms control efforts.

Americans also do not believe the SDI will adversely affect world safety. Eighty-two percent say that the SDI will either make the world safer or not make much difference. Only 12% say it will decrease world safety.

Contrary to the assertions of many in the current debate, the public favors either keeping military spending at its current levels or increasing it. Seventy-two percent take one of these positions, while only 23% advocate decreasing defense spending.

This is surprising since Americans hold misconceptions about the extent and nature of military spending that would tend to prejudice them against defense expenditures. Most Americans believe that we spend between 21 and 50 per cent of the national GNP on defense. Only 4% expressed the correct viewpoint—that these expenditures are less than 10% of GNP.

The public also greatly overestimates the share of the defense budget going to nuclear weapons. Only about one-fifth answered "less than 20%" (the correct answer). Related to this,
only 6% of those polled believed that the defense budget share going to the conventional military was over 75%, the correct figure.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

Penn and Schoen was commissioned to undertake an in-depth national poll of 1000 U.S. residents on the Strategic Defense Initiative, defense spending and related issues. The firm drew a national, random probability sample of U.S. households and conducted the detailed survey by telephone. The questionnaire was designed in conjunction with the Committee on the Present Danger to cover a wide range of areas fully and fairly. All interviewing was done by our professional interviewers out of our offices in New York between October 6th and October 9th, 1985.

The results have an overall statistical accuracy of plus or minus three percentage points at the 95% confidence interval. The exact text of the questions asked and their full results accompany this report.
DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTIONS

I. Defense spending and military posture

By a wide 55/22% margin, Americans believe that the Soviets are spending more than the U.S. on their military forces. And when asked who has the stronger military right now, a plurality of the public also believes the Soviets are on top (47/31%). Similarly, on the question of who has the stronger nuclear arsenal, 45% say the Soviets are stronger, while 31% say the U.S. is.

This perception of Soviet superiority cuts across all demographic groups in the population. The only notable exception is the lowest income group in the population, those whose family income is under $7,000. This group tends to see the general U.S.-Soviet military balance as more even than the rest of the population.

Despite this view of the U.S. military posture, Americans do not believe that the relative position of the United States has deteriorated in the recent past. Seventy-two percent think that the U.S. position has either improved or stayed the same in the last five years. Only 20% believe it has gotten worse.
In terms of defense spending, Americans do not endorse the view that the defense budget should be slashed. Twenty-eight percent of the public believes that defense spending should actually be increased, while another 44% believe it should remain the same. This means that seventy-two percent would be against any reduction in defense spending. Only 23% of the public advocates such a reduction.

There are sharp differences along partisan lines. Thirty-seven percent of Republicans would like to see the defense budget increased, as opposed to 24% of Democrats and only 20% of independents.

But, the sharpest differences are by level of education. The most educated were the most likely to support a reduction in defense spending. Forty-one percent of those with post-graduate education advocated cutting defense spending, in contrast to only 10% of those without a high school diploma.

Interestingly, when respondents who said defense spending should be decreased were asked whether this was because our defenses are in good shape, or because of budget deficit pressures, most (62%) targeted the budget deficit. Only 12% were motivated by a belief that our defenses are in good shape.
The opposition to cutting defense spending is surprising, since Americans are laboring under some basic misconceptions about the extent and nature of military spending that would tend to prejudice them against defense expenditures. In the first place, most Americans greatly overestimate the proportion of our GNP going to defense. When asked what percent of the GNP goes to defense, 13% said over 50%, 17% said 41-50%, 34% said 21-40%, 17% said 10-20% and 4% said less than 10%. This means that 96% did not get the right answer to the question—that the percent of GNP going to defense is under 10%.

Misconceptions about the nature of our defense budget are also serious. Only 22% believe that less than 20% of the defense budget goes to nuclear weapons—the correct figure. Forty-one percent believe that nuclear weapons get 20-40% of the budget and 20% believe that nuclear weapons make up more than 40% of the budget. Thus, almost three-quarters of those with an opinion overestimate the size of nuclear weapons expenditures.

At the same time, most people underestimated the part of the defense budget going to conventional military forces. Of those with an opinion, over 90% said that the share going to conventional military forces was under 75%. Only 6% got the right answer—that over 75% of the defense budget goes to the
non-nuclear part of the military.

The public’s misconceptions extend to defense expenditures in the coming year. Sixty percent of Americans believe that, taking inflation into account, defense spending will increase in the coming year. This is despite the consensus in the press and among informed observers that the defense budget will experience zero growth at most, and very possibly a decrease of some size.

Given the almost zero probability of an increase, it is interesting to note that only 28% of those who believe an increase is imminent say that this increase will be 1-5%, while 64% put the projected increase as 6% or more. In contrast, of those who believe real defense spending will decline, forty-one percent say this decrease will be 1-5% and 46% say it will be 6% or more.

Finally, despite recent conflicts with the Soviet Union, Americans do not believe that the threat of nuclear war has increased in the last five years. Only 31% endorse this view, as opposed to 64% who say the threat has either decreased or remained the same. Surprisingly, younger people are the most optimistic, with 29% saying the chances of a nuclear war are less
today than five years ago.

II. The Strategic Defense Initiative

Americans express strong support for the SDI. Those familiar with the program favor it by almost a 3:1 margin. And, when the SDI is described as "a research program to destroy incoming nuclear missiles before they reach their targets", 78% say the research and development phase of SDI should proceed. Only 16% declare their opposition.

Further, the public supports deployment of an SDI-developed system in the U.S. By an overwhelming 73/18% margin, Americans favor such deployment if the system can be successfully developed.

Feelings about the SDI vary by sex. For males, 29% say they are unfamiliar, while of those who are familiar, SDI is favored by almost 4:1 (52/14%). For females, 45% are unfamiliar, while among those with the basis for an opinion, SDI is favored by a much lower 2:1 ratio (31/15%). Interestingly, when the SDI is presented as a research program, in the manner quoted above, the sex differential becomes much less significant. Eighty-two
percent of males then favor the program and 75% of females, a
difference of only 7%.

The SDI is basically seen as a way to defend against
nuclear missiles and prevent a Soviet first strike. Sixty-two
percent of those polled say one of these two reasons would be the
best reason to favor the SDI. The next most popular reason was
reducing the arms race, cited by 21% of the public.

The view of the SDI as a defensive system is underscored
by the responses obtained from an open-ended question on the
nature of the SDI. When respondents were asked to describe the
SDI in their own words, the most common response described SDI as
some sort of system or arrangement to defend the U.S. against
incoming missiles. Typical responses were:

"System to destroy incoming missiles"

"Satellites that destroy incoming missiles"

"Defense against missiles"

"Technology to wipe out incoming missiles before striking us"
In terms of reasons to oppose the SDI, the most popular reason was cost. Twenty-seven percent say high cost would be the most compelling reason for opposition. In addition, 23% cite escalating the arms race and an identical percentage target an increased chance of war.

Americans generally do not agree with the arguments of SDI critics that the program will decrease the chances for arms control and make the world less safe. Sixty-four percent believe that SDI will either increase the chances for arms control (40%) or have no effect (24%). Only 19% think the program would decrease arms control chances.

Similarly, eighty-two percent believe that the SDI will either make the world safer (46%) or not make much difference (36%). In contrast, only 12% say the SDI would adversely affect world safety.

These findings are consistent with the public’s view that SDI should not be considered a new weapon in the U.S. arsenal. Only 29% hold this view, while 57% see SDI as a way of limiting the usefulness of nuclear weapons—a 2:1 margin.

Given these views and attitudes about the SDI, it is not
surprising that the public opposes a trade-off between SDI and Soviet nuclear weapon cuts. When asked whether the U.S. should agree not to test, develop or deploy SDI, in return for Soviet cuts in their nuclear arsenal, 77% expressed opposition. A relatively tiny 13% thought the Soviet position acceptable.

Opposition to this trade-off is strong across all demographic groups in the population. In every instance but one, opposition is over 70%. The one exception is among the lowest income group where only 57% reject the Soviet position. And even here, rejection is still favored by 34 points (57/23%).

Finally, Americans are suspicious of the Soviet proposal to hold direct arms control negotiations with Britain and France. Seventy-six percent say this proposal stems from Soviet desire to divide the West, rather than Soviet fear of British and French nuclear deterrents.
Sources for facts on U.S. military spending:

Caspar Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, before the House Appropriations Committee, Sub-Committee on Defense, February 27, 1985.

Department of Defense Annual Report to Congress for Fiscal Year 1986, Pages 77, 295.