

rationality of those who carry out research, even military research. If the critics of the feasibility of SDI are right, they will be fortified by events and star wars will never happen. Otherwise, the outcome will turn on negotiations. That, for the time being, should satisfy both the Soviet government and those who doubt the soundness of what the administration is about.

Three important questions remain, of which the chief is the relationship between SDI and the ABM treaty. The treaty (signed by the Soviet Union and the United States in 1972) was born of the conviction that the integrity of the retaliatory forces of the two superpowers would be the best guarantor of international security. The United States made this point explicit in a statement on 9 May 1972. The treaty itself requires that neither of the two superpowers should "develop, test or deploy" ABM systems, or components of them, which are "sea-based, air-based, space-based" or based on dry land and at the same time mobile. The purpose of these exclusions was to allow for the installation of two ABM systems in each country, an option partially taken up by Soviet Union (which has built a defensive system around Moscow) but eschewed by the United States (disappointed by the performance of its own system based on the Sprint rocket). On the face of things, last year's test of an anti-ballistic missile over the Pacific was already a violation of the treaty. The question when the SDI programme comes to seem a more deliberate violation would ordinarily occupy the lawyers for years to come were it not that the issue is too urgent to wait. The obvious difficulty is that even missile detection systems that could be intended as components of early warning systems, such as the satellite included in the next shuttle payload which is designed to monitor electromagnetic signals from eastern Asia, may now be thought to violate the treaty. Putting even simple particle accelerators into orbit is bound to give offence. At the very least, the United States had better look for a new understanding on the ABM treaty before it finds itself being accused of having made a mockery of the agreement. That, in present circumstances, is merely good international housekeeping.

The second issue, which will arise only if the first phase of SDI suggests that it would be feasible to build a defence of some kind against ballistic missiles, is whether it would ever be possible to construct such a system safely. There is much in what the US administration is now saying that even a less than perfect defence by each of four or five layers in a defensive system would make it impossible for a potential attacker to carry out with certainty a pre-emptive strike against its opponent's retaliatory force. Simple probability will ensure that. The calculation now is not (as in 1983) that the United States would be able to dispense with formal negotiations with the Soviet Union, secure in the knowledge that its deterrent force would always be safe, but that the installation of a ballistic missile defence would present opponents with the choice between a ruinously expensive programme of missile construction and hard-headed negotiations of the reduction of strategic missile forces. The snag, of course, is that for a period of perhaps two or three decades, the ballistic missile defence would be so far from perfect that pre-emptive strikes, either against the system itself or against the missiles it is intended to protect, would be more tempting than at present. And while each partner in the international superpower league may insist that its intentions are pacific, it must prudently calculate that its opponent will think the opposite, and will feel as threatened now by neutralizing of its own strategic forces as in 1972, when anti-ballistic missile systems were first reckoned to be paradoxically dangerous.

The third issue that stands out is pedestrian and financial. The first five years of SDI is reckoned to cost \$26,000 million, of which the US Congress has so far appropriated about five per cent. By the heady yardsticks of the US defence budget, this is not for the time being a large sum of money, but by other standards it is an enormous sum, especially when it is acknowledged that most of the money would be spent on the purchase of technical skills urgently needed in other fields. At a time when the US administration is hunting around for economies to make elsewhere in its use of public revenues so as to avoid the dangers of instability stemming from fiscal imbalance, it is an extravagance

to be avoided like the plague. So that too is another part of the case for asking that the United States should go further than the undertaking given to Mrs Thatcher, and that it should get next week's Geneva talks off in the right spirit not merely by volunteering a moratorium on anti-satellite weapons but by asking for a reinterpretation of the ABM treaty that will trade a licence to continue under the umbrella of SDI with a reaffirmation of the ABM treaty, which itself was always intended as a prelude to reductions of strategic arms. □

## British broadcasting

*The British government's perennial problem of financing the BBC cannot be shuffled off.*

THERE are three things Britain does better than anywhere else: landscape gardening, military pageantry and television. Mrs Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister, would put the excellence of British television at risk by having the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) take advertising. She should not for the following reasons: (1) Even a little would spoil the pleasure of one of the few places on the globe where one can watch television without the annoying intrusion of advertising, like a little rubbish tip on a very beautiful mountain. (2) It would not solve the BBC's crisis, which is to have, in terms of annual revenue, something like half what commercial television enjoys (£600 million to £1,000 million).

The BBC itself has been arrogant in thinking it can escape real cuts in services while the rest of the British public sector cannot. It should jettison something, and be seen to do so. The best candidate is the popular music radio channel, Radio 1; pop music — ask any teenager — sounds better when interlaced with commercials. Second best (only because it would save merely £20 million a year) is local radio, always a mistaken venture into the fringes of broadcasting where a national service never need have gone. Third choice is to amalgamate two radio channels, say 2 and 4, or 3 and 4. Or the BBC could start later in the morning and stop earlier at night.

The BBC, which is not supported by the government but which enjoys a monopoly to sell licences to those who pick up electromagnetic signals at a price fixed by the government, is quite right to say two things. First, the secret is to broaden the base of the licence fee. (Why should hotels buy a single licence for 250 rooms?) The second is that the pensioners and others who really cannot afford the £65 a year the BBC now wants should be subsidized by the social services. The fact is that old people gain more enjoyment and benefit from television than much of the population. For those with a decent income, £65 is not too much. They should be prepared to pay 18 pence a day for what sustains them.

The real problem is to narrow the gap between the BBC and commercial or independent television (ITV). The way to do that, in Mrs Thatcher's mind, is to reduce ITV's income, undermining the old joke question of what is the difference between an oil tycoon and a videotape editor on London Weekend Television. (Answer: the tycoon does not have London weighting, the extra pay for working in London.) ITV companies pay a levy on two thirds of their profits after an initial levy-free slice. The government is considering switching the levy to a revenues base. But it has done this in the past and found it useless when the ITV companies had a bad year. What is needed is a new more flexible formula based partly on profits, partly on levy. The result would be to reduce the ITV's willingness to pay any price for peace among its trade unions on the grounds that what it pays comes straight off the levy. It is this that unfairly encourages a brain drain of talent from BBC to ITV at every level, from performer to make-up girl to cameraman.

When all these remedies are at hand, the BBC and the government should apply them. Just as British motorways are so strikingly free of billboards — a relief to the eye after the United States or even France — so an unblemished television landscape should not be surrendered lightly. □