

Togetherness by debate

Public debate about SDI (and AIDS) has made few converts but may have bridged a gap.

If the success of a contribution to a debate is measured by the number of people whose minds are changed, this year's report by the American Physical Society on the US Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) is a failure. To some, it demonstrates how technically far-fetched are the goals of SDI, but the authors of the report are careful not to say that any particular ingredient of SDI is a technical impossibility, which has been construed by supporters of SDI as a guide to the areas and amount of research needed, and thus as a blueprint for future spending. Privately, SDI supporters are scornful, and say that the report tells them nothing new. Publicly, they poke fun at its authors and remind them of eminent scientists who declared that powered flight, or nuclear power, or space travel are impossible.

The US Department of Defense also appears to relish tying up reports in extended and often seemingly perverse classification reviews — on occasion going so far as to classify sections of a report containing little more than quoted testimony from open Congressional hearings — and, after declaring them free from information that might jeopardize national security, pouncing on them for not being sufficiently up-to-date. Such was the fate of the APS report, and a similar fate seems to await an extensive analysis of SDI by the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, now stalled in the Pentagon.

The technical debate, whether SDI can work, and the political debate, whether it should be attempted, apparently lead independent lives. Even a discussion between Kumar Patel, chairman of the APS panel that produced the report, and Louis Marquet, of the SDI Organization, before an audience of physicists, soon turned ideological, with Marquet responding to Patel's criticisms by declaring that strategic defense is a noble aim and more research must be done. This state of affairs no doubt distresses those who think politicians should decide such matters from a base of technological competence. But how well informed must politicians be before they can make an informed decision? And even if those who control funds knew and understood as much about SDI as the authors of the APS report, would their decision-making be any easier, or receive more universal acclaim? One presumes that scientists on both sides of the debate are working with the same laws of physics, and the evident fact that they arrive at different conclusions hardly encourages the view that scientifically knowledgeable politicians would somehow do better, and reach an apolitical consensus.

But professional people should not be too depressed. Their contributions to the SDI debate may not have caused anyone to switch sides, but they have accomplished something more subtle: they have moved the sides closer together, even though the participants may be reluctant to admit it. Supporters of SDI, rather than admitting that President Reagan's vision of an impenetrable shield to render missiles obsolete is no more than wishful thinking, now declare that of course they never saw that ideal as an immediate aim but as a long-term theme behind continued research: 'enhanced deterrence' is their watchword now. Opponents, on the other hand, having begun by roundly declaring SDI both a physical impossibility and a destabilizer of the strategic balance, have difficulty bringing themselves to admit that defence as such is not evil, and that some research into defensive strategies is an obvious and prudent course.

What happens now is easy to predict. Everyone agrees that defensive measures are useful and that research must be done. Probably sooner rather than later, the SDI Organization will be formally disbanded, but its objectives and funds will find shelter under different umbrellas in the Department of Defense. Some research areas will be abandoned, and new ones will be added. Given the amount of money being spent, some working devices

will be built, although they will be less efficient or useful than their inventors might hope. And the arms race will continue.

Although the nature of the debate is quite different, ideology also plays a large role in decisions about how best to cope with the spread of AIDS, about which there has been more willingness to conduct a rational debate. Perhaps this is because ideologically charged phrases such as "national security" are not involved, although certainly reference to sexual practices can change a discussion into a shouting match. Or perhaps there is greater confidence in the track record of researchers to curb potentially fatal epidemics than there is for physicists to prevent nuclear war. Whatever the reason, reports by Surgeon General C. Everett Koop and the Institute of Medicine have been well received, and their recommendations widely adopted.

The Institute of Medicine says it will now update its successful report *Confronting AIDS*. The nature of the AIDS problem and the national and international response to it have been changing at a rate that a re-evaluation after only two years is entirely appropriate. But the decision to proceed with a second edition signals the level of commitment that the institute has to its recommendations. It would be easy enough to grow discouraged that some of the most pressing and urgent problems identified in the original edition have still not been tackled. There is still no body identified to coordinate the US response to AIDS, no strong leadership from Reagan on the subject and no large-scale public education campaign. But the report has forced the Reagan Administration to address these issues in a formal sense, and that is all to the good. Again, it seems, even when a public argument changes few people's minds overtly, the argument creates a vocabulary in which the two sides can talk to each other. □

Distracting occasions

This year's solstice season seems to be more than usually provided with a portentous calendar.

THIS could be a momentous week in the history of the world. Mr Mikhail Gorbachev is travelling to Washington to sign a treaty with President Reagan that will abolish Euromissiles; quite apart from its intrinsic importance, the treaty will break new ground in arms-control arrangements by its detailed prescription of arrangements for verification of compliance by on-site inspection at the volition of the inspecting side. Mr Reagan will be able to make a stirring speech and put the onus of ratification on the US Senate which, when the chips are down, dares not say no.

Much the same is happening with the US dollar, which is now subsiding quietly but steadily in the wake of the long haggle between the White House and the US Congress in their nearly abortive attempt to cut at least \$23,000 million from the current US budget deficit. In the short term, the value of a currency on the foreign exchanges is determined by the supply of and the demand for it; the US dollar has been falling against other currencies because creditors outside the United States have turned shy of lending more. Indeed, the great stock-market crash of 19 October would have come sooner if the growing shyness of private lenders had not been obscured by the willingness of creditor central banks to keep on buying dollars, as required by the Louvre agreement earlier this year. Now, even the central banks are shy. Congress will have to do much better in fleshing out its agreement with the White House than in the negotiations leading to it if it is to persuade them to behave differently.

Meanwhile, the European Communities will yet again be seeking (and, almost certainly, failing) to assure their future by striking a deal, in Copenhagen, about the limits of what they spend on agriculture. Who can give much thought to the disappearance of assorted airliners, the impending famine in Ethiopia and the Irish question? Who, in these distracting circumstances, can dare assert his prior interest in the pursuit of natural knowledge? □