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Interview with Mr. Joseph Coors

This interview was conducted by Lt Col Donald R. Baucom on 31 July 1987 and took place in Mr. Coors' conference room at his brewery in Golden Colorado.

Lt Col Donald R. Baucom (B): My first question today is when did you first meet Mr. Reagan?

Mr. Joseph Coors (C): The first time I met Ronald Reagan was when he was Governor of the state of California. I believe it was in the spring of 1968 at a Republican governor's conference in Palm Springs.

B: Did you have any extensive discussions with him at that time?

C: All the governors were there. He was the chairman of this meeting, so there wasn't enough time to do more than say hello and get to know him a little. I knew several of the other Republican governors at that time, and it was an interesting meeting for me.

B: Following the President's election, when was the first time you heard about the idea of a strategic defense?

C: Well, someone would have to remind me of the exact dates, but my first involvement with the SDI project was related to the work of General Graham and his High Frontier project. As I recall, the funding for General Graham's program had been deleted. At this point the project was transferred over the Heritage Foundation. Because I was a member of the board of the Heritage Foundation and was generally interested in the project, I became a member of a committee that was

investigating the possibilities of defense against incoming missiles. Of course, it wasn't called SDI at that time.

This committee met a number of times in Washington. Its membership included Ed Feulner, President of Heritage; Danny Graham; Jac Hume; Karl Bendetsen; Dr. Edward Teller (who has been a good friend of mine for years); and a good number of other people, including Lowell Wood. There may have been some minutes of these meetings. If so, they are probably kept at Heritage.

There were two different concepts that came out of the High Frontier-Heritage activities. One was Graham's High Frontier concept which was based on kinetic kill vehicles. Graham pushed this idea very hard. There was a number of us--Dr. Teller, Karl Bendetsen, Jac Hume, and myself--who didn't believe Graham's was the right approach.

We started meeting pretty regularly with Jay Keyworth, the President's science advisor. The five of us (Teller, Bendetsen, Hume, Keyworth, and me) really concocted the idea of using methods other than kinetic kill vehicles, that is using the particle beam or the laser (the more exotic approaches you might say), to destroy Russian missiles in their blast-off phase, the three minutes of their boost phase. We became pretty well convinced that this was the way to go rather than the Danny Graham approach.

B: Where did you meet?

C: The five of us met on a pretty regular basis in Karl Bendetsen's office. He was retired, but he still had an office in Champion Paper Offices in Washington. Also, we met a couple of times in Keyworth's office.

Keyworth was an important figure in our efforts. He was in the  
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White House and was terribly enthusiastic about the concept.

[Interruption for phone call from Senator Wirth to discuss the possibility of having the super collider located in Colorado]

B: We were talking about the two groups involved in the early effort to establish a strategic defense program: the one centered around General Graham and favored kinetic kill vehicles; the other group of which you were a part favored the use of exotic technologies.

C: Danny Graham completed his report and presented it to the President. The other group, a sort of an ad hoc group, also went to the President. We believe we were responsible for his March 23, 1983, announcement of a plan for the SDI.

B: Could you tell me when this ad hoc group had its first meeting with the President?

C: Several months before the final meeting in which we urged him to put this issue to the public. Actually, I believe you will find that Dr. Keyworth wrote most of the speech that was modified as the President has always done. But Keyworth was a major part of the effort to put that speech together.

B: General Graham mentioned to me a particular time when you, Mr. Hume, Mr. Bendetsen, and possibly Dr. Teller saw the President. He seems to believe that you briefed on High Frontier as well as on the exotic means of missile defense. Can you recall whether or not you briefed on both systems?

C: As I recall our major focus was definitely not on kinetic kill systems. But our major purpose was not to sell the President on a specific concept, but on the general idea that this whole SDI program should be approved by him, initiated by him, and announced to

the public.

B: This fits with General Graham's comments in the sense that he said he thought your discussions with the President were rather philosophical.

C: That's right. The discussions were of a general nature.

B: Graham also said that you spoke a great deal of the 'Soviet threat.

C: Yes. We focused on the idea that strategic defense was a method of eliminating the need for the continuing adherence to this MAD concept. In other words, the whole purpose of this was to get away from the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction under which both sides continued to build their nuclear missile forces in a very wasteful, expensive exercise which envisioned the possible death of millions of people and destruction of many of our largest cities.

I think this effort to get away from MAD was the main motivation of all who sought the initiation of a strategic defense effort. It really didn't matter that much to us which technical approach you took to provide the defense against missiles.

B: General Graham was not at this meeting with the President, right?

C: That is correct.

B: Was that a very small meeting essentially restricted to your group of five people--?

C: And the President and--

B: Was Martin Anderson there then?

C: No, Martin Anderson had gone back to California at that time. I'm sure that Mike Dever was--he was always present when we

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had these kinds of meetings. As a matter of fact, Mike set the meeting up for us. But it wasn't a huge room full of people; it was in the Oval Office.

Of course, several of us were rather close to the President, particularly Jac Hume and I who had been on President Reagan's so-called "kitchen cabinet." We had been working very closely with him in his various campaigns.

As I mentioned earlier, I have known the President since the 1967 Republican Governor's meeting at Palms Springs when he completely captivated me. I decided right there that he was the man I wanted to be President. At the 1968 Republican convention in Miami, I was the only delegate from Colorado who voted for Ronald Reagan when Richard Nixon beat him out. Of course in 1972, there was no battle. In 1976, we put on a strong fight down in Kansas City where I was again a delegate. Then, finally in 1980 in Detroit and in 1984 we won.

B: Did you have contact in either the 1976 or the 1980 campaign with any of the staffers who were working defense issues?

C: No. I was just interested in getting Mr. Reagan elected. So, I didn't get involved with specific issues before he became President. I really didn't get involved in military issues until about 1981 when Jack Marsh, Secretary of the Army, appointed me his civilian aide for the state of Colorado. I had known Jack for several years. Last October he appointed me civilian aide for the Sixth Army which covers a twelve state area.

So, I was involved with the military from that point of view--the Army. As far as weapons work--I have a scientific and technical education and background and have always been interested in

things of a technical nature. Edward Teller has been a friend for some time, and we used to talk about the work being done at Berkeley and Livermore in particular. I was at Livermore once and had a classified briefing on the work on X-ray lasers (Excalibur). I was also informed about other work that was being done on particle acceleration at Livermore and Los Alamos.

B: Dr. Teller tends to minimize the role he played in influencing the President on the matter of strategic defense. How do you feel about this appraisal of his role?

C: I think having a man of that renown, that expertise, support strategic defense was very influential. We felt that he played a major part because he was a scientist who knew what he was talking about first hand in regard to some of the capabilities or potential capabilities of some of these systems.

B: So, he was a man who would lend credibility to this effort.

C: That's right. Also, he was a good friend of Keyworth. So, that was a scientific team, along with some old foggy friends, who pushed the issue of strategic defense with the President. I don't know why Dr. Teller would down-play his role other than to say that he is a very humble person. But I believe his presence was critical to convincing the President to make his speech on strategic defense to the nation.

B: Have you toured the Cheyenne Mountain command facility?

C: Yes. I have been there a couple of times.

B: What do you think of that facility?

C: Oh, I think it's unbelievable; it's outstanding. What they do there is mind-boggling.

B: Do they run a demonstration of their tracking system and displays?

C: Yes. I went in there one time with Congressman Jim Collins of Dallas who is a friend. He's retired now. They put on quite a show for us, probably because he was a Congressman as much as anything else. Part of the demonstration was to contact a nuclear-armed B-52 that was flying out over the ocean somewhere. We could hear the conversation. They showed us the big screen with the tracks coming in. They also showed us how they were monitoring all the things in space. This was several years ago, but it was already getting pretty confusing. There was a lot of trash up there as well as active satellites.

B: Did any of the demonstrations show what the big screen would look like with Soviet warheads coming in over the north pole?

C: Yes. This tied in with the Distant Early Warning system.

B: Did that leave quite an impression on you?

C: Oh, gosh, yes! It left an impression on me, but it also told me that it was too late to do anything when the warheads are over Canada heading for our cities. It's nice to know, but what do you do? All we could do then was push the button and go ahead with this M-A-D.

B: This is kind of what Martin Anderson says about the President's experience at Cheyenne Mountain in the summer of 1979. Mr. Reagan saw this demonstration and was so impressed that he talked about it all the way back to California.

C: Yes, you couldn't go down to NORAD and not be affected.

B: Did the President ever share any of his views with regard to how he personally felt about these issues of strategic defense and

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MAD.

C: Sure, in our discussions with him. They weren't long discussions--you don't stay with the President for hours as much as you might like to. He made it very clear to us that he was not in favor of the continual build-up of these nuclear missiles and that he was looking for an answer to this problem. I believe he was very pleased that our group as a whole (High Frontier and our ad hoc group together) had come up with a possible solution. He was enthusiastic about our proposal, and that's why he was willing to go as far as he did in making his speech.

Subsequent to that meeting, subsequent to his talk, our group of five men was quite active in pushing the strategic defense program. We enlisted the help of Bernie Schriever and encouraged the President to set up a special entity like the Manhattan Project to handle this new program. We worked hard on this effort and were very disappointed when Mr. Reagan put the program in the Defense Department. We felt that there would be such tremendous consequences of this project that we could not entrust it to the Pentagon bureaucracy. There are just too many things already going on in the Defense Department for its bureaucracy to concentrate adequately on this important program. To put this project under a big committee that would include all the chiefs of staff and other people would kill it; the program would simply get lost and would not receive the kind of attention it should. Also, we felt a special organization which the President could legally establish would have separate monetary control--be funded separately--and therefore could better concentrate on the project. We failed in that effort. He wasn't willing to do it, and I will have to say that

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I think the project under Abe [General Abrahamson] is really going forward in an excellent way.

B: Well, you did recognize one of the key problems where funding is concerned. Secretary Weinberger made a key decision in 1984 that the funding would be separately controlled for SDI; the money would not be spread out among the services.

C: So, maybe we had some influence on this decision. I talked to Cap about it at one time; about setting up a separate entity.

B: Did President Reagan give you any reason why he decided not to go with a Manhattan-type arrangement?

C: No. He just said he had made the decision that he should put it under the Department of Defense. He doesn't have to give a reason.

B: That's true. When was the last time that you and your ad hoc group saw the President before his March 1983 speech?

C: If my recollection is correct, it was just several days before.

B: Do you recall anything specific about that meeting?

C: No. We put our best foot forward to sell the concept.

B: This wasn't a meeting in which he called you in at the last minute to discuss with you what he was thinking about doing?

C: No. He didn't call us. We made the appointment. But he expressed enough interest in what we said that this is when Jay and others started writing his speech. This came about pretty rapidly. I would imagine that there must be records at the Heritage Foundation of the dates our ad hoc committee met there. These were under the name of High Frontier Project. Mr. Edwin Feulner, Jr., is the man you

should talk to at Heritage. He was a major factor because Heritage was the avenue used to keep the High Frontier Project going.

B: Do you know Ambassador Wilson, and if so, how was he involved in the activities we have been discussing today?

C: Yes, I know Bill Wilson very well. He was not involved with any of our meetings at Heritage as best I can recall. But Karl Bendetsen and I were in constant touch with Bill Wilson with regard to planning our strategy. My recollection is that we contacted him at the Vatican and at the State Department when he was in Washington.

B: How about Mr. Bendetsen--would you elaborate on his role in these efforts?

C: Karl sort of carried the banner for this ad hoc group. He was the one who kept us informed, he did a lot of the work in preparing documents and procedures and programs. He arranged the meetings to get us together. He spent a great deal of time during the year or year and a half we were working on this effort.

B: Do you still maintain contact with Mr. Bendetsen?

C: Yes.

B: I understand he is quite ill now. Is that correct?

C: I'm afraid he is.

B: I called his office and asked for an interview. The secretary told me that he is too ill to give an interview.

C: I didn't know he was that ill. Is he at home in Connecticut?

B: I was told that he is staying in Florida now.

C: Well, he has a home in Florida and spends all winter there. I haven't talked to Karl in a few months; I'd be glad to contact him

and see if he would be willing to talk with you. He is a key figure in this.

B: I would appreciate this. [Mr. Coors did in fact contact Mr. Bendetsen and confirmed that his health is too poor to permit him to give an interview. Mr. Coors suggested contacting Ms. Geraldine Pugh, Bendetsen's secretary, for possible information on his activities.]

What about Mr. Hume?

C: He is at home out in California. In fact, I talked to him yesterday. He started this CFA (Citizens for America); he was the founder of that group which was set up to promote Ronald Reagan's programs. He is still very active. I'll see that you get his phone number before you leave if you like.

B: That would be fine. How about Mr. Frank Barnett? Have you had any contact with him?

C: Yes. Frank is a good friend of mine. I have been involved on the advisory council of the National Strategy Information Center which is his organization. Frank was involved in the Heritage meetings.

B: Sir, let me tell you what General Graham has said about Mr. Barnett's role and see what you think of his account. Graham said that when he was working on strategic defense in the early days, Mr. Barnett would assemble groups of national leaders and bring in speakers to present the latest in strategic thinking to these groups. He offered General Graham the opportunity to address one of these groups.

C: That's probably true, but I believe that was before this thing started to jell.

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B: This would have been 1980 to 1981.

C: Yes. Frank, through his organization, is putting together conferences all the time. He is an expert at that. He works strictly with military affairs. He has taught at the war colleges. Recently, he set up some conferences on disinformation in Europe--Italy, Paris, and London. He is very active in the military phase of international affairs. He is particularly interested in the Communist-Soviet interface--the Soviet threat to the U.S.

B: I guess you have attended some of these conferences.

C: I have.

B: You just don't remember this one at which General Graham made a presentation?

C: No. Barnett might put on half a dozen of these conferences a year. It is too far away for me to go to all of them.

B: Even if you did, there might be several presentations and this one might not stick out in your mind.

C: That's right. I don't remember this particular one.

B: Is there anything else of relevance that you think we have missed?

C: Well, you know you have to think about these things a little bit, but I don't think we have missed anything essential. If anything does come to my mind, I'll get in touch with you. [Recording interrupted briefly at this point.]

Do you know anything about the ERIS system that is being built by Lockheed? I don't know the relative merits of the various approaches to missile defense; but I have been doing some reading on ERIS, and it certainly would be a good starting point, a good

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foundation, upon which we could build a later, more advanced system. I think Marty [Martin Anderson] and Dr. Teller and Jay Keyworth and others will all agree that if we wait for the ultimate system we will never have a defense against missiles. All these scientists who are saying it is no good because it will only stop 95% or 99% and won't get 100%--I don't agree with that.

B: What is one city worth?

C: Yes. If you can save one city or ten cities--we ought to get going on it.

B: I agree with you. When you look back at military history you see that new weapons tend to be weak and ineffective when first they are used. The early firearm was introduced in a formation in which it was surrounded by pikes because once a gun was discharged its user was defenseless because of the time required to reload. So the pikes protected him while he reloaded.

C: And you see this in the evolution of any kind of a weapon system--airplane, whatever. There are always improvements. But if there is something that is available and effective today, I think we should go ahead with it right away.

B: Dr. Anderson indicated to me that he, Keyworth, Mr. Meese, and Richard Allen were involved in the idea of strategic defense in the early part of Mr. Reagan's presidency.

C: That was when they were all in the West Wing of the White during the early days of the Reagan administration. I think Dick Allen was in the National Security Council for only a year and a half--two years at the most. Dick is a good friend of mine too.

B: Where is he now?

C: He's in Washington doing consulting work.

B: Then, I'll be able to contact him easily. He is one of the people I want to interview.

C: Yes. You should interview Dick. Although to the best of my knowledge he wasn't intimately involved in this SDI, he certainly was involved in the background. Marty Anderson had also left the government by the time I got involved in the strategic defense matter.

B: How about Senator Wallop?

C: He is a great guy. I never had any contacts with him on this subject. I think he had been one of the promoters of strategic defense along with Jim Courter. They were trying to promote the concept and funding for the concept--they have been pushing to get the program going.

B: Senator Wallop is one of the streams that leads into the President. The contact between Senator Wallop and the President with regard to strategic defense apparently was arranged through Senator Laxalt. Wallop was one of the first people to start pushing lasers back in the 1978-1979 timeframe.

C: It is a little hard to determine which is the most effective of the various systems--the neutron beam, the particle beam, the laser, and maybe one or two other concepts of zapping something out of the sky. I think it is up to the scientists to finally determine which one of these is going to be the best. That might be difficult because they all have different ideas as to whether their idea is the best or the other guy's idea.

B: Have you seen Dr. Teller's new book, Better a Shield than a Sword which has been out about two months?

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C: No.

B: Well, the title tells you where the emphasis is in this book. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your efforts in behalf of strategic defense?

C: No. I don't think I have anything else to add right now.