The Folly of Scrapping SALT
Arms Control Experts Believe
Reagan Decision Will Undermine
U.S. Security

On May 29, two days after President Reagan announced that the U.S. would no longer consider itself obligated to comply with SALT II limits, Paul C. Warnke, Gerard C. Smith, Robert S. McNamara, and Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr. briefed the press on the subject. The press briefing was sponsored by the Media Information Project, a joint service of the Arms Control Association and the Committee for National Security.

The text that follows includes the opening statements, answers to questions from the press, and a fact sheet on the U.S. and Soviet SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) compliance record. Arms Control Today presents this expert testimony as a brief and cogent statement of the problems associated with the administration’s SALT decision.

Spurgeon M. Keeny, Jr.: This briefing has been called on short notice to respond to the Presidential statement on SALT II released Tuesday afternoon. As you know, the President stated on Tuesday that the United States would be retiring two Poseidon submarines for economic reasons. More significantly, the President announced that the United States is no longer obligated by the provisions of SALT II and would in fact be exceeding its limits this fall.

We are fortunate this morning to have three uniquely qualified experts to discuss this serious development: Ambassador Paul Warnke, who was the principal negotiator of SALT II; Ambassador Gerard Smith, who was the principal negotiator of the ABM Treaty and the Interim Agreement on Strategic Offensive Arms, which is also, I presume, rejected by this policy decision; and the Honorable Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, who played an important role in the early negotiations that preceded the beginning of the SALT negotiations. Ambassador Warnke will lead off the discussion.

Paul Warnke: The fundamental question on this or any other decision is whether it is consistent with the security interests of the U.S. In my opinion this decision is inconsistent with our national security. I think that there are too many people in the Reagan administration who get confused about what the purpose of arms control is. They don’t recognize that its sole purpose is to improve our national security. That’s the test that has to be applied in determining whether or not to enter into an arms control agreement and whether or not to continue to abide by its terms.

I think that the decision two days ago was a gratuitous exercise which callously flouts the provisions of the unafliliated SALT II Treaty. It would clearly be to the advantage of the United States to continue to adhere to that treaty. Instead, we plan to go ahead and equip more than 130 B-52s with long-range cruise missiles that will put us over the SALT limit of 1,320 MIRVed ballistic missiles (equipped with Multiple Independently targeted Re-entry Vehicles) and bombers armed with cruise missiles. We could easily continue to abide by the terms of SALT II at the end of the year, by dismantling more Poseidon submarines to compensate for the conversion of more than 130 bombers to carry ALCMs (Air-Launched Cruise Missiles). As it is, we plan to be in excess of the 1,320 level.

This action will open the floodgates for massive Soviet increases. The Soviet Union at the present time is up to the limit of MIRVed ballistic missiles. These are the massive Soviet missiles that have always been cited as being the greatest risk for the survival of our own ICBM force. The objective in both SALT and START (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) has been to reduce the number of Soviet MIRVed land-based ICBMs. At the present, as I said, they are up to the permitted SALT level. They will soon deploy the SS-24, which is a landbased ICBM with ten warheads. If the SALT limits were to continue, they would have to take out of service existing SS-17s, 18s, or 19s to accommodate the SS-24s. As it is, if the SALT limits lapse they get a free ride and can add the SS-24s to their force without going to the trouble and expense of destroying existing SS-17s, 18s and 19s. They will make the SS-24 rail-mobile and we will still have those SS-17s, SS-18s, and SS-19s in their silos.

In addition, without the SALT fractionation (i.e., MIRV warhead) limits, they can go ahead with unrestrained additional MIRVing of their existing missiles. We estimated back in 1978 that the SS-18s could carry as many as 20-30 warheads each. These missiles now have ten. That means that without the SALT restraints they could add over 6,000 warheads just on the SS-18. They can also increase the number of warheads on the SS-19. So what we are now facing is a Soviet reaction that, in a relatively short period of time, could add twice as many ICBM warheads to their present totals. I submit that the recent decision is inconsistent with the security of the United States, and that the President’s decision should be reversed.

Gerard C. Smith: It looks to me as if we are abandoning the notion of parity based on sound agreed restraints and going back to an open competition with the Soviets, presumably in the hopes of achieving superiority. The Secretary of Defense has made it clear that he is restless about the notion of equivalence and wants to move towards strategic superiority.

The President talks a good deal about how the Soviets must count the costs of violating the SALT agreements. It seems to me that this decision doesn’t reflect any cost counting. Now Paul Warnke has just talked about some of the costs. What about the question of commitment by the Soviets not to interfere with our intelligence operations needed to monitor our present agreements? If the agreement is “kaput”, presumably that commitment not to deliberately conceal their forces is removed as well. Our intelligence operations are therefore going to be prejudiced by the end of that commitment.

This decision couldn’t have been based on any military calculations. I believe that the Joint Chiefs are not happy about the prospect that Paul Warnke has just outlined for us. This is an ideological decision reflecting pressures from people who don’t like arms control and who have no idea of the cost of this breakaway. It seems to me...
that this is the second step towards the destruction of arms control, the first having been made last year in putting forward a new interpretation of the ABM Treaty which would have permitted us to do anything we wanted short of deploying a new defense system. Next year we are facing the annual five-year review conference with the Soviets about the ABM Treaty. And after these last moves, I am glad it’s not my job to handle the American case in reviewing that treaty next year. Furthermore, the continuation of the Geneva negotiations after this breakaway is not likely to be at all productive.

It seems to me this recent decision leaves us with the Congress as the sole protector of the case for arms control. The President is making a strong case that this new situation makes it even more important to have the full defense appropriations requested in the 1987 budget. It seems to me that a better case can be made for the Congress moving at a more moderate pace.

Robert McNamara: Let me stress a fact that you are perhaps familiar with. The Soviet Union and the United States have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads between them. Of that number 22,000, roughly 11,000 offense and 11,000 offense are strategic missile warheads and bombs that can destroy the opponent’s homeland. Those are the forces that are limited by SALT II. It’s true that the SALT limits are high. But at present they are the only limits we have and without them we will face a totally unstrained arms race. If we’re going to negotiate deep cuts, which both President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev have said is their intention, and which I strongly support, we need a base from which to make those cuts. The SALT limits provide that base. An unstrained arms race—and I very much fear that we are about to embark upon one—will not provide that foundation.

As Paul Warnke and Gerard Smith have said, SALT prohibits the Soviets from further increasing their missile launchers and their bombers, and in particular, it prevents them from adding to their massive and what some in this country consider their dangerous MIRVed land-based missiles. Without SALT, those limits will be swept aside and the entire structure of offensive arms limitations laid out over a period of 15 to 20 years by four presidents—Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter—will be destroyed.

Why did those four presidents negotiate these arms control agreements? They believed it was in our national security interest to do so. They didn’t negotiate them because they trusted the Russians. They didn’t negotiate them because they were trying in some fashion to be sweet to the Russians. They negotiated them because they believed that arms control was in our security interest. And every single one of these agreements were supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for exactly that reason. Because of Tuesday’s decision, we will no longer be able to contain the Soviet expansion of their warheads and, in particular, we will not be in a position to limit the fears of many in our society of a Soviet first-strike capability. It is those fears which add instability to our respective forces in a time of crisis. And that is one of the greatest dangers we face. Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Ford and Carter were right. The agreements they put together do contribute to our national security.

Question and Answer Session

Q: Supposedly the rationale for abandoning SALT is that the Soviets are cheating on a variety of points. There are allegations that the Soviets have already broken out. Would any of you like to speak to that?

Warnke: I don’t think there is any plausible argument that the Soviet Union has violated the core elements of SALT II. That fact has been attested to by our own commissioner of the Standing Consultative Commission, General Richard Ellis. It has also been stated in testimony by General Chain, former director of the Politico-Military Bureau at the State Department. What we are talking about now is the gutting by the United States of the central provisions of SALT II—the numerical limitations. The latest Joint Chiefs’ posture statement set forth what they know to be the Soviet force structure, and it indicates that the Soviets are abiding by those limits.

There are legitimate questions about some of the more tangential aspects of the SALT II agreement, for example with regard to the SS-25. The Soviet Union maintains that this single-warhead mobile ICBM is not a new missile but rather an improvement, a modernization of the SS-13. This is a debatable point. The United States thinks that it goes beyond the limits of a permitted modernization. If necessary, there is a proportionate response available to us. Back in June of 1985, the President said that as a possible response to the SS-25, the U.S. could continue with the development of the Midgetman, which is also a single-warhead mobile ICBM. From a strategic standpoint, I’d like to see both sides acquire more single-warhead ICBMs. If we are ever wise enough to negotiate a warhead limit, these smaller ICBMs would be advantageous, since you would want to have as many targets as possible for the number of warheads that you are allowed. So, an appropriate proportionate response would be to go ahead with the Midgetman, and I think that the Soviet Union might go along.

The other legitimate compliance question related to SALT II is whether there is excessive encryption of telemetry, which unfortunately is not a terribly clear provision in the treaty. It would have
been preferable if we had barred any encryption of telemetry. Then there could be no disagreement. But encryption is permitted unless it will impede verification, which comes perilously close to a subjective judgment. But again, if we have trouble with that provision, we should renegotiate it, not dump the entire treaty.

But as far as the central elements of SALT II, the numerical limits, are concerned, these limits are very much in the security interests of the United States, and there is absolutely no question that the Soviets have complied with these core provisions.

Smith: In your hands is a fact sheet that the Arms Control Association published on what actions the Soviets have taken in order to comply with SALT II (see box). That fact sheet lays out the extraordinary degree of compliance by the Soviets. Yet, no mention of the Soviets' positive compliance record is contained in the President's reports to Congress. All he talks about is how scrupulously we have complied. I would urge you to examine carefully the record of Soviet positive compliance we have assembled.

McNamara: I don't think there is any doubt that the Soviets have violated the arms control agreements in some fashion. And I strongly suspect that we have as well. But I would suggest to you that neither one of us have violated them in ways that have significantly changed the military balance. I am not trying to justify a Soviet violation on the basis that it doesn't change the military balance. But what I am suggesting to you is that: a) The violations have not changed the military balance; b) There are ways we can address those violations and try to negotiate satisfactory settlements. We've done that in the past through the Standing Consultative Committee; and c) the action we are taking to respond to these violations is totally inappropriate. It will lead to a change, or will lead to a perceived change, in the military balance. This change will be responded to in ways that are very costly and increase crisis instability. That is contrary to the direction in which we should be moving.

Keeny: By taking the step of saying we are no longer going to abide by the SALT II agreement, we have given up any basis to complain about Soviet noncompliance or to work constructively on ways to resolve these problems.

Q: In your opinion, what future Soviet deployments would be prevented by our adhering to the SALT II Treaty?

Warnke: One obvious example is that they will not eliminate existing MIRVed ICBMs when they put the SS-24 in the field. I just don't think that they are sufficiently philanthropic to spend the amount of money required to eliminate an SS-17, SS-18, or SS-19, to fill in the silo, to move the equipment, and to dismantle and destroy the missile. To do so would strike me as being inconsistent with historical patterns.

McNamara: The President's statement had these words: "In the future, the United States must make decisions regarding its strategic force structure on the nature and magnitude of the threat posed by Soviet strategic forces." I think that it's very significant that he didn't say "by the threat posed by strategic offensive forces." There is a clear implication in this that we will adjust our force structure to changes in both their offensive and defensive forces. We have maintained for some time that the Soviets have a lead in strategic defensive forces and that they are engaged in programs to further develop and deploy them. That, of course, would be contrary to the ABM Treaty. There's a strong implication in our statements that we ourselves are moving away from the ABM treaty. And this is very, very serious indeed. To move away from SALT is, from my point of view, a tragedy. To move away from the ABM Treaty would be a disaster. We began working to obtain the ABM Treaty in November, 1966. And it took us from November, 1966 to May, 1972—six years—to And it took us from November, 1966 to May, 1972—six years—to persuade the Soviets that it was in their own interest to accept the treaty. Finally, after six years of work, we persuaded them. Now, there is a very serious danger that we are moving away from the SALT treaty: structures, I guarantee that there will be an acceleration of the offensive arms race the likes of which you can't even imagine.

Smith: My understanding is that the debate within the administration continues on this subject. And I suspect the Joint Chiefs of Staff are not happy with this breakaway from restraints.

Warnke: Well, I have no inside information about the Reagan Administration. All I know is what you gentlemen tell me.

McNamara: Here's that sentence: "Furthermore, the U.S. will not deploy more strategic ballistic missile warheads than the Soviet Union." It didn't talk about bombs, it didn't talk about cruise missiles. All I'm really trying to point out, ladies and gentlemen, is that we have had some very carefully crafted agreements to restrain both sides and now we're moving beyond those. And once you move beyond those very carefully crafted agreements, which also have some ambiguities in them, you're in a totally uncharted field.

Q: How will this repudiation of SALT II affect President Reagan's desire to develop his Strategic Defense Initiative?

Smith: I think that the President's appeal to the Congress for full funding of SDI, which is contained in his May 27 statement, is in fact a warning that unless the Congress fully funds the SDI request, we perhaps won't live up to the terms of the ABM Treaty. So there is that connection. But I don't feel that the Administration feels confident enough in its defensive research that it wants to see any real change in the offensive balance just yet.

Q: Could you elaborate on why you think the Joint Chiefs are not happy with this development?

Smith: The Joint Chiefs historically have been in favor of all our arms control agreements. Last June when the same question was raised about continuing to comply with SALT II, I believe, the Joint Chiefs were in favor of continued compliance. I don't think their view has changed.

"The Soviets have 'hot' production lines for some of their ICBMs. They can produce those things like sausages."

—Paul C. Warnke

Warnke: Back in July 1979 the Joint Chiefs testified in support of SALT II, saying that its restraints were useful and bore more heavily on the Soviet force structure than they did on that of the United States. That is still the case. The Soviets could violate the SALT limits very easily if they wanted to. As a consequence, from a military standpoint, abiding by the limits is the most desirable thing to do. In addition, the Soviets do have "hot" production lines for some of their ICBMs—which are the very same systems the President and some of his advisors have constantly cited as threatening to the United States. They can produce those things like sausages.
Q: I’d like to ask the panel how likely it is that the United States will break out of SALT II this year given the fact that there might be a summit.

Smith: I think that there is some flexibility. For instance, it wouldn’t be very difficult for the Pentagon to discover that it will take longer to do this conversion of B-52s to ALCMs than they had thought. And they could thus delay our exceeding the SALT limits until March or April of 1987. If a second summit was imminent, it wouldn’t surprise me at all for the Administration to delay exceeding the limits of SALT II.

Q: Do you have any idea why this repudiation of our adherence to SALT came at this time?

McNamara: Certainly one possible explanation is that they are attempting to stimulate Soviet willingness to engage in constructive negotiations toward achieving the 50 percent reductions the President spoke on. The other, a step that that is a very dangerous step to take. The Congressional Research Service prepared a report in 1984 that addressed this problem of whether or not SALT II was in our interest and what would happen if SALT II were scrapped. The CRS estimated that by 1990 the Soviets would have doubled their arsenal and that the missile component that some believe leads to our first-strike fears—fears which the Scowcroft Commission didn’t share and which I don’t share—would increase from roughly 9,300 to something close to 17,000 warheads. Now we’re not going to sit here and do nothing in the face of that kind of an expansion. We will react. And that is what’s about to be unleashed. And if we’re unleashing that as a bargaining ploy, well, I hope we’ll take advantage of it. But it’s really opened the doors to a serious escalation of the arms competition by both sides.

Q: Is it likely that the Soviets will increase the number of warheads on their MIRVed missiles?

Warnke: We thought it sufficiently likely that we regarded the fractionation limits in SALT II—which limit the number of warheads the Soviets can put on an ICBM or SLBM—as among the most important provisions. If you look at the relative size of the MX and the SS-18, it’s quite clear that they could at least double the number of warheads on the SS-18 without making them significantly less destructive than the warheads on the MX. If you wanted to make each warhead smaller, you could certainly put 30 on. We have felt at times that the trade-off is worth doing. That is why we’ve had as many as 14 warheads on the Poseidon missiles even though each warhead is no more than 40 kilotons, which is sometimes referred to as a popgun. It is only three times the yield of the bomb that leveled Hiroshima. So when you are talking about these kinds of yields, it does not seem too far-fetched to think that they would MIRV up to 30 on the SS-18.

Keeny: I think it’s generally recognized that if the Soviets wish, they could go directly to 14 warheads on the SS-18, which adds 1,200 half-megaton weapons to their arsenal, without any major redesign. Whether they would go to 20 or 30 is debatable, but it is an option that they would have. It would require a major test program and that would be apparent a year or two years. Now there is no restraint on them, though they might not find it worth the trouble to do so.

Q: Why do you think the President took this ambiguous way of renouncing SALT II? If Reagan wants to renounce an unratified treaty that he has for years said is flawed, he can certainly renounce it. If he wants to embrace arms control, he can embrace it. But a year after he’s given all these warnings, he still is leaving all these little escape hatches.

Warnke: I don’t really see any escape hatches. It seems to me that it’s a totally unambiguous statement. I was startled at the headline in the Washington Post, that Reagan was going to continue to comply with SALT. It’s time we take this guy at his word. He usually means it. And what he is saying is that “I have determined that in the future we are not going to base our decisions on the standards of SALT. We’re going to base our decisions instead on the nature of the threat we face.”

What he has said is that we are no longer constrained by SALT. Certainly he can do it. It’s not illegal. There is no existing legally binding treaty. But I guess it was Talleyrand who said, “It is worse than a sin. It’s a mistake.”

Q: Isn’t this really a political decision designed to satisfy the right wing for the time being?

Warnke: When it comes to that 131st B-52 with ALCMs, who does he throw out of the sleigh to the wolves at that point? If he has to placate them now, isn’t he going to be in a worse position next time around? He’s already told them, “I’m scrapping SALT.”

McNamara: What do you say could be entirely correct. The problem is, what do the Soviets think? And I’ll guarantee you they don’t think that. They are reading our actions quite differently from the way you read them or I read them. I’ve been in this position, and I’ve read their actions differently than they read them. I had to. I couldn’t say, “Well, they’ve got some people that they’ve got to placate on the left or right or whatever and they’re going to be nice guys and give them time and they’ll work it all out—in the meantime we don’t have to move.” No way! That’s not the way we behave and I don’t think it’s the way they’ll behave.

“It looks to me as if we are abandoning the notion of parity based on sound agreed restraints and going back to an open competition with the Soviets, presumably in the hopes of achieving superiority.”

—Gerard C. Smith

Q: Well how are they reading us?

McNamara: They’re reading us as moving toward superiority, technical superiority, offensive superiority, defensive superiority, and a first-strike capability.

Smith: I would like to address this question of how the President might say, “Well I see progress here.” I think the conditions President Reagan has required the Soviets to meet in order for him to reconsider his decision are impossible conditions. The conditions just can’t be met: 1) that they stop “cheating”; 2) that they reverse their buildup; this buildup is not inconsistent with the treaty but he wants them to reverse it; and 3) that they start negotiating seriously. I think those are impossible conditions.

Q: How do you think the President’s statement will be assessed among America’s allies?

Smith: I noticed that the administration reported that they had consulted with the Allies and I also noticed that Paul Nitze last night said, “Well, what we were talking about was not the same as this.” So my guess is that there is going to be a fair amount of bitterness and hostility between a number of capitals about this.
Q: Isn't this decision an attempt to get the Soviets to negotiate seriously in Geneva?

Warnke: Well not really. It doesn't seem to me that telling them that arms control is dead is going to encourage them to be forthcoming in arms control. It just doesn't add up. The President says he wants the Soviets to reverse their massive strategic buildup as we implement our strategic modernization program. Again, I just don't think that they are going to buy that. They're not going to feel that we can go ahead with our strategic modernization program but they can't.

Q: I don't think he really said we're not going to continue to abide by SALT II . . .

Warnke: No, he said the SALT structure, which is both SALT I and SALT II. And he's already indicated, of course, that the ABM Treaty can be interpreted in a fashion that makes it a total nullity.

Q: But he has offered conditions under which he will reconsider this decision.

Warnke: Yes. But what are they? First, they've got to reverse their massive nuclear build-up, in other words unilateral disarmament. I don't think they're any more willing to do that than we are. The second one is SALT compliance: stop the massive violations. There are no massive violations. There are some questionable actions that I think are in violation of the treaty. But I don't think that all of a sudden they are going to stop putting the SS-25 in the field. And even if they did, I don't think that would satisfy the President's conditions. And the third one is: Take a more constructive attitude at the Geneva talks. What we're asking them to do in Geneva is to cut their offensive weapons by 50 percent while we have no restrictions on a defensive system. So what we're asking them to do is to cooperate with us in giving us a first-strike capability. Again, I don't think they are philanthropic enough to abide by that condition. I agree with Gerry [Smith], these are impossible conditions.

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The U.S. and Soviet Positive SALT Compliance Record

I. **Soviet SALT Deactivations**

The SALT I and SALT II accords have required the Soviet Union to remove 1,079 ICBMs, 245 SLBMs, 21 bombers, and 21 nuclear missile-carrying submarines:

- In order to comply with the SALT I and II “freeze” on “heavy” ICBM silos, between 1973-1980 the Soviet Union withdrew 288 SS-9 ICBMs as SS-18 ICBMs entered the force. SALT II also prohibited the USSR from testing and deploying a “new” heavy ICBM and limited the extent to which existing heavy ICBMs could be modernized.
- Between 1974-1986, the Soviet Union removed 582 SS-11 ICBMs as newer SS-17, SS-19 and SS-25 ICBMs were deployed.**
- Between 1972-1985, the Soviet Union dismantled or converted 14 Yankee-class submarines and 7 Hotel-class SLBMs as new Delta- and Typhoon-class subs were added.
- Between 1975-1978, the Soviet Union dismantled 209 SS-7 and SS-8 ICBM launches to allow for permitted increases in SLBMs.
- Between 1977-1985, the USSR removed 224 SS-N-6 and 21 SS-N-5 SLBMs as SS-N-18 and SS-N-20 SLBMs were introduced.
- In 1985-1986, the Soviet Union has dismantled 21 Bison bombers.

Between 1986-1990, SALT II would require the Soviet Union to remove older ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers, as new ones are deployed. Although the precise number of retirements will depend on the number and character of the new systems the Soviets deploy, they would have to deactivate approximately 500 to 600 strategic nuclear delivery systems.

II. **U.S. SALT Deactivations**

The SALT I and SALT II agreements have required the United States to deactivate 320 ICBMs, 576 SLBMs and 13 nuclear missile-carrying submarines:

- Between 1972-1975, the U.S. removed 260 Minuteman I ICBMs and 60 Minuteman II ICBMs in order to increase the number of Minuteman III ICBMs from 230 to 550.**
- Since 1972, the U.S. has replaced 176 Polaris A-3 SLBMs on 11 submarines with Poseidon C-3 SLBMs.
- Since 1979, the U.S. has replaced 192 C-3 SLBMs with Trident C-4 SLBMs on 12 submarines.
- Since 1980, the U.S. has dismantled or converted 10 Polaris submarines carrying 160 A-3 SLBMs in preparation for the deployment of Trident subs.
- In 1985-1986, the U.S. dismantled three Poseidon submarines carrying 48 C-3 missiles, thereby remaining within SALT II limits as two new Trident missile-carrying subs began sea trials.***

Between 1986-1990, SALT II would require the U.S. to remove or retire a number of older ICBMs, SLBMs, or ALCM-carrying bombers as new ones are deployed. Although the precise number of deactivations would depend on developments in U.S. modernization programs, approximately 200-300 systems would have to be removed.

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*In order for the two parties to remain within the treaties' numerical limits, as new delivery vehicles are deployed, older ones must be dismantled or destroyed.

**Since SALT prohibits the construction of new fixed ICBM launchers, new silo-launched land-based missiles must be deployed in existing launchers and the older missiles removed from the operational forces. U.S. dismantling of 42 Titan II ICBMs, claimed by the Reagan administration as part of its SALT compliance record, is omitted here because no SALT limit would be violated if the missiles remained.

***The Reagan administration states that dismantling of two Poseidon SSBNs starting May 1986 is not being done to comply with SALT but to avoid overhaul expenses.