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# POLICY *Review*

October & November 2000

Reagan's Real Reason for SDI

by [Mark W. Davis](#)

Sunday, October 1, 2000

*"But it is inconceivable to me that we can go on thinking down the future, not only for ourselves and our lifetime but for other generations, that the great nations of the world will sit here, like people facing themselves across a table, each with a cocked gun, and no one knowing whether someone might tighten their finger on the trigger."*

— President Reagan, 1983

Seventeen years have passed since the fortieth president revealed his vision of a strategic missile defense to a national television audience. In those intervening years, from Ronald Reagan's first term to Bill Clinton's last term, the foreign and defense policies of the United States have remained hostage to a glacial domestic debate over national missile defense. Liberals remain hardened in their opposition to any sweeping "Star Wars" proposal, which they believe would offer little security, wreck the current arms control regime, and stimulate other nations to redouble their efforts to hit American cities. Conservatives, though they have scaled back much of Reagan's original plan, have made his basic idea the centerpiece of their vision for national defense in the twenty-first century. Though there is agreement between both major political parties to go forward with some defensive measures, U.S. policy makers and politicians remain so deeply divided over the issue of how far to go that it is far from clear that even the 2000 presidential election will break the policy stalemate.

Meanwhile, though the United States is far and away the most powerful nation in the world, the world is becoming more dangerous. Kashmir is now a nuclear flashpoint. North Korea has lobbed missiles

over Japanese airspace. Within a few years or even months, it is likely that Asia will be girdled by nuclear powers, from Israel, just over the narrow expanse of Jordan to Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, India, China, and North Korea. The bipartisan Rumsfeld Commission, after reviewing highly classified intelligence data, concluded in 1998 that North Korea alone could project a threat deep into the interior of the United States — an arc of vulnerability sweeping from Phoenix, Ariz., to Madison, Wisc. — in as little as five years.

For the most part, it has been Republicans who have worried about the national and personal implications of living in such a world. They have challenged the willingness of Democrats to trust the survival of American cities to the goodwill and rationality of dubious leaders in Baghdad, Tehran, Pyongyang, and elsewhere. They worry that American families are about to lose Franklin Roosevelt's "fourth freedom" — the freedom from fear. They believe that America's internationalist foreign policy will be blunted once small states can deter our forces and intimidate our leadership.

However, the GOP falls short by not providing a foreign policy context in which its defensive system would operate. Republicans have not come to grips with the likelihood that even at best, an advanced sea-based or space-based system would remain in constant technological competition with efforts to defeat it, and powerless before cost-effective biological warfare. They have not accepted that the value of such a system would remain dubious if, in the decades to come, Moscow and Beijing continue to respond to it as a mortal threat.

Republicans have faced up to some facts, but not to others. Republicans have been unwilling to explain how global efforts at nonproliferation would work within the context of a strategic defense. Their unwillingness to come to grips with the complexities of their vision renders the Republican approach somewhat chimerical.

It is time for both liberals and conservatives to move beyond the partisan choice between a strategic defense and global arms control to a discussion about how each can reinforce the other. The time has also come to think in the broadest terms — to seek ways to develop a strategic defense to protect all nations and thereby begin the long and arduous process of eliminating the threat of weapons of mass destruction to all civilization.

In the context of the current debate, such an ambitious framework will strike many as hopelessly utopian. We should remember, however, that using a strategic defense to impel the governments of the world to control and eliminate weapons of mass destruction is not a new idea. Rather, it is the forgotten part of the original strategic defense vision, an elaborate vision articulated by President Reagan and subsequently dismissed or forgotten, especially by those who most often invoke his name.

## "Star Wars" and sarcasm

It is likely Bill Clinton intended to bait yet another overreaction from conservatives, complete with cries of "giving away the store" and "selling out" to a foreign power. Whatever his motive, President Clinton jammed every hot button in the conservative psyche when he recently hinted that he would share missile defense technology with Russia.

Many of today's Clinton-fatigued conservatives no longer remember that the first president to make this very offer was none other than Ronald Reagan. This lack of memory can be demonstrated in a casual survey of any number of current policy briefs from major conservative think tanks, or from floor speeches by Republican leaders in Congress.

This is, perhaps, understandable. Conservatives are acutely aware of the sorry record of foreign policy idealism and arms control. They remember that the moral blandishments of the 1920s (and perhaps the 1990s) only led to a more dangerous world. They have been jaded by a shrill opposition given to apocalyptic claims, from the neo-Malthusian Club of Rome to a nuclear freeze movement that almost undermined NATO strategy.

As a result, the national defense side of Reagan's plan has been adopted by conservatives, while the more idealistic, global defense portion has been discarded. Extensive attention is given in conservative literature to defending the American continent and close allies. It is hard to find any mention today of Reagan's idea of sharing it with potentially hostile powers.

If the right is dismissive toward Reagan's proposal, the left is cruel. In *Way Out There in the Blue*, Frances FitzGerald resorts to flights of literary rhetoric about the Bible, movie imagery and "post-modernist symbolism" to embellish her denigration of strategic defenses as "Reagan's greatest triumph as an actor-storyteller."

Several biographers suggest that the seeds of Reagan's idea were actually planted by his starring role in *Murder in the Air*, a 1940 cliffhanger in which he portrayed a secret agent with an "Inertia Projector" capable of bringing down fleets of enemy planes with electrical currents. Lou Cannon speculates at length over the influences science fiction may have had on Reagan's thinking, and attributes to Colin Powell an assertion that the president was influenced by the anti-war homily delivered by the alien in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

It is true that Reagan had a fantastic vision of sharing missile defense technology to create a nuclear-free world. In his memoirs, Reagan complains: "Some of my advisors, including a number at the Pentagon, did not share this dream. They couldn't conceive of it. They said that a nuclear-free world was unattainable and it would be dangerous for us even if it were possible; some even claimed nuclear war was 'inevitable' and we had to prepare for this reality. They tossed around macabre jargon about 'throw weights' and 'kill ratios' as if they were talking about baseball scores."

The initial reaction of Richard Perle, Reagan's own assistant secretary of defense, was to call the idea of a multi-layered space defense "the product of millions of American teenagers putting quarters into video machines."

Lou Cannon quotes National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane as calling strategic defense "the Sting," a con job in which Reagan would secure deep cuts in the Soviet arsenal by trading away a research project of dubious value. Reagan's arms negotiator Paul Nitze gave a speech in 1985 that undermined the president's proposal with criteria of cost and survivability that no research program could meet. Michael Deaver, always close to Nancy Reagan, reported that the first lady implored the president "not to push Star Wars at the expense of the poor and dispossessed."

Strobe Talbott, then a journalist, opined that strategic defenses would spark "unceasing competition without stability." Sen. Ted Kennedy's staff slapped Reagan's program with the dismissive moniker, "Star Wars," a theme recycled by Soviet negotiators as "space strike arms." Soviet leader Yuri Andropov called Reagan's idea "irresponsible" and "insane."

Conservatives have since come around to the implicit sanity of a national strategic defense. When it comes to the global implications of Reagan's proposal, however, most conservatives differ from liberals only to the degree to which their contempt is vocal.

## Listening to Reagan

In the face of such universal rejection, it is startling to review Reagan's remarks during the middle years of his presidency. Dozens of speeches and interviews offer a portrait of a man who, though lacking the terminology of the professional policy maker, was far from the addled dreamer so often portrayed. In dozens of forums, Reagan strenuously advanced a worldview based on serious ideas of astonishing scope.

Agree or disagree, Ronald Reagan's ideas deserve better than to be so thoroughly ignored in the current national debate.

Reagan worried about a future in which many countries would possess the ability to deter or even destroy his country. His solution was to turn U.S. deterrence doctrine upside-down, to shift to defensive technologies that he hoped to extend to the entire world. A skeptic of traditional arms control, he believed that a global defensive system could goad reluctant powers into a commonality of interests. He sought to forge a realistic confidence with which humanity would be able to turn its back on nuclear weapons for all time. To put it in contemporary terms, Reagan believed the hardware of technology could strengthen the software of diplomacy.

The role movies may have played in his thinking is purely speculative. It is, however, a matter of fact that as a newly elected governor, Reagan was briefed by one of the giants of modern physics, Edward Teller, on defensive technologies at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in 1967. Martin Anderson has vividly described Reagan's 1979 visit to the NORAD's Cheyenne Mountain complex, and how troubled he was by the powerlessness of a system that could detect impending annihilation but do nothing to stop it. As a presidential candidate in 1980, Reagan was lobbied on missile defenses by Wyoming Sen. Malcolm Wallop.

When the president finally unveiled his concept in a March 23, 1983 national television address, it was the result of meticulous preparation in secret White House meetings between the national security staff, the president's science advisor, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was only after this review that the president felt confident enough to tell the American people, "I've become more and more deeply convinced that the human spirit must be capable of rising above dealing with other nations and human beings by threatening their existence."

In many of his subsequent remarks, Reagan worried about the long-term dangers of nuclear confrontation. "We can't lock ourselves into a fatalistic acceptance of a world held in jeopardy." He spoke in worried tones about the future, seeing simple deterrence ("the sword of Damocles that has hung over our planet for too many decades") as a strategy eventually doomed to fail at the hands of a Third World madman. "This doesn't make sense," he told editors and broadcasters in 1986, "in a world where madmen can come along as one did half a century, almost, ago — Adolf Hitler." Far from being a movie-intoxicated ignoramus, Reagan seemed to have a grasp of the catastrophic potential of human history that eluded his learned advisors.

President Reagan understood that achieving a comprehensive strategic response to this threat would tax the best efforts of our leaders and the fortitude of our people. Many have fairly criticized him for slipping into simplistic talk of a space "shield" or a national "roof." It is perhaps true that Reagan "talked down" when he should have "talked up." His critics should also acknowledge, however, that Reagan often spoke in realistic terms of diligence in science and diplomacy.

"It will take years," he said, "probably decades of effort on many fronts. There will be failures and setbacks, just as there will be successes and breakthroughs. . . . But isn't it worth every investment necessary to free the world from the threat of nuclear war? We know it is." He leaves us with words to remember every time the media trumpet the latest failure of a strategic defense test or a budget hawk complains about the cost.

As a Republican aide living in Washington during those balmy years, I well remember the passion — even urgency — with which the president sold his plan. "It is not a bargaining chip," he asked a gathering of GOP operatives to believe. Few of us did.

Ronald Reagan soldiered on before audiences indifferent to his ideas, speaking in idealistic ways that would be dismissed as infantile goo-gooism if uttered by a president today. In an August 1985 press conference, he asserted that such a defense should go beyond protecting America and protect "the people of this planet." In a September press conference, he spoke more explicitly:

I'm sorry that anyone ever used the appellation Star Wars for it because it isn't that. It is purely to see if we can find a defensive weapon so that we can get rid of the idea that our deterrence should be the threat of retaliation, whether from the Russians toward us or us toward them, of the slaughter of millions of people by way of nuclear weapons.

Reagan added that such a shared defense would be the first step to "realistically eliminate these horrible offensive weapons — nuclear weapons — entirely." In this one statement, the president suggested a willingness to repudiate the central doctrine of U.S. defense policy — deterrence — while seeking to go far beyond any arms reductions agreement to eliminate nuclear weapons outright.

It was a stunning, breathtaking departure from the past. And it went almost virtually unnoticed. The media downplayed it. The president's advisers ignored it. Some of the president's supporters (and, it seemed at times, his official spokesmen) seemed embarrassed, as if he had wandered into a gaffe instead of making a ringing declaration.

Yet in an October press conference, Reagan further decoupled his vision from a purely national defense. He said, "Such a defense-oriented world would not be to any single nation's advantage, but would benefit all." In the same month, the president devoted a radio address to asking Americans to support "a balance of safety, as opposed to a balance of terror." He went to the United Nations to plead for a world effort to "escape the prison of mutual terror."

## Protecting the national interest

Of course, Reagan never turned his back on the national interest. He was determined to go ahead and develop his Strategic Defense Initiative over any Soviet veto. He told the press that the "research and testing of SDI would move us toward our ultimate goal of eliminating nuclear weapons altogether from the face of the Earth." But, he cautioned, "by necessity, this is a very long-term goal. For years to come we will have to continue to base deterrence on the threat of nuclear retaliation."

Reagan's notable arms control breakthroughs were propelled not by moral blandishment, but by a determination to match other powers weapon for weapon, a foreign policy that embraced Hobbes's dictum, "covenants without swords are but words." This was the approach Reagan demonstrated in his willingness to match Soviet SS-20s with Pershing IIs. Reagan's tough approach on intermediate-range weapons elicited horror from the arms control community. But his confrontational negotiating style, sharpened by his experience as a former labor negotiator, turned out to be the path to the verifiable elimination of a whole class of nuclear weapons.

In a similar way, Reagan believed his Strategic Defense Initiative would provide the pressure for nations to act and the "vital insurance" to maintain strategic stability in the midst of deep reductions. He did not lose his sense of realism. He saw strategic defense as a new kind of sword for a new kind of covenant.

The president made it clear in a BBC interview that he had thought through how his new world order would unfold. Once a strategic defense was developed, Reagan said he would extend it to the allies, and then the Soviet Union, as the first stage in a graduated program from offensive to defensive weapons, culminating in the total, verifiable elimination of nuclear arsenals. A transcript shows the following exchange.

*BBC interviewer:* Are you saying then, Mr. President, that the United States, if it were well down the road towards a proper SDI program, would be prepared to share its technology with Soviet Russia, provided, of course, there were arms reductions and so on on both sides?

*Reagan:* That's right. There would have to be the reductions of offensive weapons. In other words, we would switch to defense instead of offense.

In the same interview, Reagan looked ahead to our day, when the genie of nuclear proliferation would be far out of the bottle. The reason for having defensive weapons, Reagan said, is because "everyone in the world knows how to make one, a nuclear weapon—we would all be protected in case some madman, some day down along the line, secretly sets out to produce some with the idea of blackmailing the world."

When his plan was attacked from the left, Reagan spoke contemptuously of the doctrine that governs us to this very day, saying, "MAD stands for mutual assured destruction, but MAD is also a description of what the policy is."

Many of his aides still did not take him at his word, or believe he meant it. They were fully prepared for him to accept Mikhail Gorbachev's offer at the Reykjavik summit of deep cuts in exchange for gutting research on strategic defenses. They were not prepared for him to walk out. "And had Reagan been the passive creature popularly depicted," Edwin Meese recalls in his memoirs, "the offer would have been accepted on the spot, SDI would have been eliminated." As eager as he was for deep arms reductions, Reagan was steadfast in linking any disarmament to the "insurance" of strategic defenses.

Even after his unmistakable show of principle in Iceland, many of Reagan's admirers continued to misunderstand him, applauding him for his cynical SDI ploy to this day. Liberals — this time, his natural allies — let their antipathy for Reagan paint them into the corner of defending "madness." Rereading the president's words today, one sees that his tone had grown plaintive, as if for the first time in his life he was playing to an empty house.

### A commonwealth of secure states

The next president would do well to avoid the trap of reflexive opposition to Clinton's vague revival of Reagan's idea. The better opportunity for him would be to define sharp differences of implementation. Like Reagan, the next president should make it clear that there will be no Russian (and now Chinese) veto on development and deployment. The offer made by Vice President Al Gore to defend all 50 states, but in "a way that does not destroy the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty," is simply oxymoronic. The next president should demonstrate that the United States is prepared to renegotiate all arms control agreements to make them subordinate to our overall strategic vision. In short, the next president also has an opportunity to enact a radical rethinking of all our priorities. He could challenge conservatives to think globally, to link our continental defense to a solution that addresses the anxieties of our allies, and eventually, those of Russia, China, and other states. He could challenge the foreign policy establishment to undertake a diplomatic effort of unprecedented scope.

If such a challenge seems overwhelming, perhaps he could draw inspiration from Reagan's ability to stay focused on the long view. Former chief of staff Donald Regan, often no admirer of his boss, nevertheless caught the essence of Reagan's approach when he wrote that the president "believed that large questions were easier to resolve than small ones, and that the big answers usually contained all the smaller answers within it."

Above all, the next president should keep in mind Reagan's governing maxim, "trust but verify." Radical cuts would depend on a highly intrusive inspection regime of unprecedented scope and depth. The appointment book style of current international inspections could not be tolerated. Nations that do agree to such a thorough and mutually verifiable regimen of inspections, reductions, and continuous monitoring would come under the umbrella of defensive technologies. Those that choose to remain on the outside would run the risk of falling behind and becoming vulnerable to one another.

Would many nations accept? It is important to keep in mind the coercive power Reagan's concept exerts to this very day. The mere threat of a strategic defense was as least as central in forcing the Soviet Union to negotiate as his willingness to deploy Pershing II missiles. Even the sharply limited plan of the Clinton administration elicits hysterical reactions from Moscow and Beijing today. Though a comprehensive defense may be impossible, the strategic defense proposal still has the power to intimidate nations. As such a proposal, it is a source of distrust among nations. As a reality, if implemented in a sober and pragmatic way, its power could be used to create a widening circle of trust and mutual security.

The next president should modernize Reagan's plan well beyond missile defense, to respond to a widening array of other kinds of weapons of mass destruction. Such a shared defense could include the sharing of intelligence, early warning assets, and the technology of border defense, as well as cooperation in anti-terrorism efforts. It could also include the joint development of new vaccines against biological warfare and the sharing of technologies dedicated to defending against any exotic security threats that might arise in the twenty-first century.

For decades, many nations would doubtlessly choose to remain outside this defensive commonwealth. That, too, would serve a useful purpose. It would identify and isolate scofflaws, those nations that pursue weapons of mass destruction purely for advantage and power, and not for security. A sufficient deterrent would have to be retained, one enhanced and stabilized by strategic defenses. Eventually, however, a mixture of fear and the ceaseless quest for security should goad most nations into joining this arrangement. Once a part of it, they would become equal members of a commonwealth of safety.

Such a plan would also address the central weakness of the current American nonproliferation policy — our hypocrisy. On the one hand, we hold that massive deterrence is fine and necessary for the United States. We do not question our need or right to keep a fleet of submarines at sea, each with enough firepower to incinerate 300 cities. On the other hand, we incessantly preach to New Delhi and

Islamabad that they need not worry about what their neighbors are doing down the Indus, much less what is going on in China, Russia, or Iran.

Reagan anticipated that the moral underpinnings of a bipolar world, no less than its strategic assumptions about deterrence, would be inadequate for the future. He spoke openly and candidly about wanting to replace a purely national defense with a growing commonality of states that ensure and bolster each other's security. If this circle could be widened enough, and verification deployed deeply enough, mankind could then realistically dream of working toward a world without weapons of mass destruction.

## "Appease the weak"

If Reagan seems naïve, perhaps we would do well to recall the words of another misremembered conservative icon, Winston Churchill. Those most given to invoking his memory often betray no awareness that in his second premiership, Churchill spent his fading powers in a vain but valiant attempt to resolve the Cold War. Regarding the Soviets, Churchill said we should not be "in too much of a hurry to believe that nothing but evil emanates from this mighty branch of the human family, or that nothing but danger and peril could come out of this vast ocean of land in a single circle so little known and understood."

Churchill's statement about the Soviet Union could be applied now with equal merit to today's Russia, China, and Islamic fundamentalist states. True, they cherish weapons of mass destruction because the weapons confer power status they would otherwise not enjoy. True, it would be dangerous to ignore the unpredictability of states undergoing a painful transition. It is also true that whether we like it or not, these regimes face security dilemmas of their own.

Both Churchill and Reagan believed in the vigorous engagement of such weaker states. Once they had gained the upper hand, each went from being a warrior to being a peacemaker. Every student of history knows of Churchill's savage disparagement of the appeasement policy toward Hitler. Fewer remember that Churchill, as leader of the opposition two years after the death of Hitler, said that the "word 'appeasement' is not popular, but appeasement has its place in all policy. Make sure you put it in the right place. Appease the weak, defy the strong." ("Magnanimity" was another watchword of Churchill's, taken from his study of Lincoln, that struck at the same theme.)

Conservatives well remember Reagan's defiance of the Soviet Union, and his necessary definition of its last, dangerous push for expansion as an "evil empire." Few now recall that as the Soviet threat weakened, Reagan made strenuous efforts to engage — Churchill might have called it showing magnanimity to — the Russian people. Reagan did not change principles. He changed strategies when it became clear that the Soviet Union would soon no longer be an empire, nor necessarily a force for evil.

It was, of course, Churchill who first gave wide currency to Reagan's watchwords, "peace through strength." Both men were optimists, yet neither could be accused of succumbing to utopianism. Like Churchill before him, Reagan had won his fame by alerting his countrymen to the dangers of naïve idealism.

In the middle of his presidency, Ronald Reagan had not grown soft in mind or heart. He was simply looking to the horizon, to a world in which many nations would possess nuclear weapons. He understood this would be a crisis unprecedented in human history, one requiring a hard idealism and unprecedented statesmanship.

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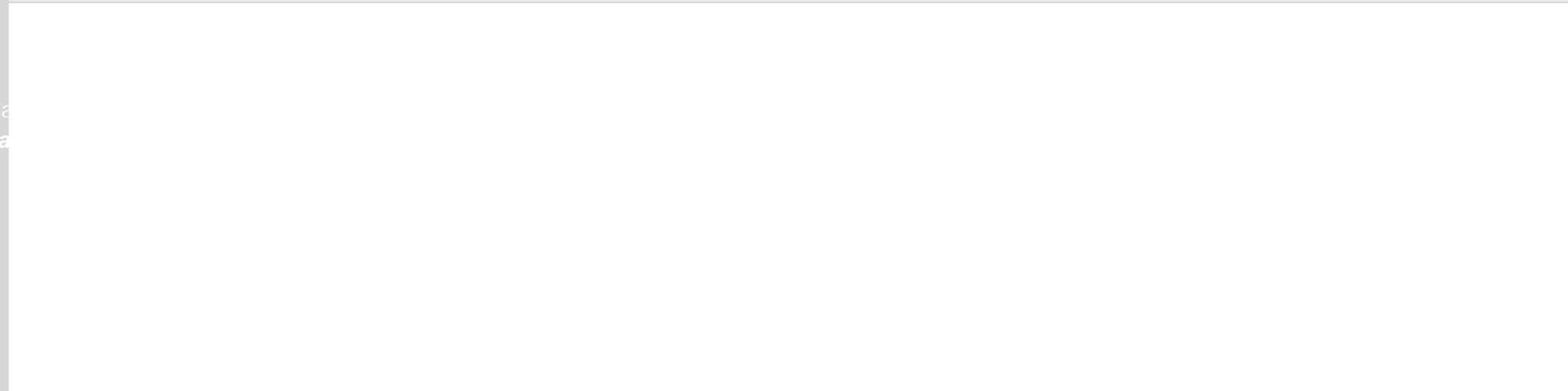
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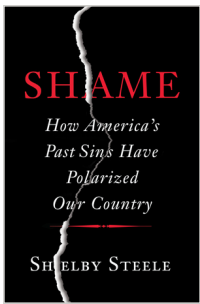


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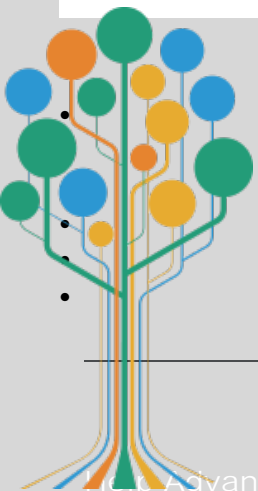
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