

Fortress mentality

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Now is the time to warn ourselves of the dangers of impregnability. True, as a country we have been violated in a most brutal way, and we'll have to make sure that we are safe in the future. And yet the way we are going about securing our safety, especially after September 11, is deeply flawed. Rather than make us think more deeply about whether we should spend \$60 billion on missile defense when the weapons used against us were box cutters and knives, we are rushing ahead with the project. American lives have been lost, and the temples of the two gods we most like to serve—wealth and power—have been destroyed or damaged. Yet instead of keeping its cool, our government seems to be losing its head in a frantic attempt not to appear impotent and incompetent.

I don't want to enter the public debate on whether missile defense is technologically possible or whether it would trigger a new arms race. And I don't want to fill this space with the discussion of how many hungry, naked and unprotected people will *not* be fed, clothed and housed if we spend such immense resources on dubious defenses. Rather I want to reflect on an important consideration voiced in Europe in the 1980s about the desirability of "Star Wars," as the missile defense project was dubbed during the Reagan administration. And that consideration has much to do with the way we pursue safety.

A 1987 document prepared in England and titled *Star Wars: Safeguard or Threat? A Christian Perspective* asks, "How far is the search for impregnability a withdrawal from the risks of conflict and change? A longing to block out the possibility of political repentance, drastic social criticism and reconstruction?" This may seem like a soft theological concern, one that doesn't deserve to be taken seriously in the world of hard politics. But it is not. Russian President Vladimir Putin touched on the issue a few weeks ago when he expressed concern that in charging ahead with missile defense the United States might be taking the position that "America is so strong that it does not need any negotiations and any agreements."

The Bush administration clearly sees the U.S. as powerful enough to go its own way irrespective of the interests of other nations, or of agreements made with them. This in-your-face style of clearing international obstacles corresponds to one ultimate goal: to maintain the one remaining superpower's unassailable power position in the network of global interdependence. The stated goal of missile defense is the reduction of vulnerability. But the reduction of vulnerability is the enhancement of one's capacity to do as one pleases, and to do so without regard for the interests of others. Impregnability is an invitation to the misuse of power.

Something even more important than a likely misuse of power is at stake in missile defense: *our ability to perceive ourselves as engaged in the misuse of power*. This is how most of the international community perceives the U.S. Armed with economic and military prowess, it treads on the toes of smaller nations, and does so with the smugness of a self-styled "city set on a hill." Many U.S. citizens are shocked to hear such a charge, and suspect envy and anti-American sentiment in people who make it. But the shock is only a consequence of having effectively insulated ourselves from the opinion of others—global communication networks notwithstanding. If the U.S. should succeed in making itself invincible, what will induce it to take the perspectives of smaller nations seriously, to look at itself through their eyes, to perceive the possible injustice of its international actions and mend its ways?

Advocates of a missile defense have the well-being of U.S. citizens at heart. But in an interdependent world, well-being cannot be secured by eliminating militarily the pressure of near and distant neighbors with whom we are engaged in economic, cultural and other exchanges. Unlikely as it may seem, such pressure is a contributor to national flourishing in a global environment. Without justice for all, there can be no lasting peace, not even for the powerful.

And the pursuit of justice requires of nations, no less than of individuals, the ability to transcend their own perspectives and take into account the perspectives of others. Impregnability would hinder this country's already diminished ability to see itself through the eyes of others. Missile defense is not in the best interests of its citizens because it would reduce their ability to repent and walk the path of justice and mercy.