**#WTH: Can Trump Really Build a Golden Dome to Protect America? J.D. Crouch Explains.**

Episode #320 | June, 5 2025 | Danielle Pletka, Marc Thiessen, and Dr. J.D. Crouch

Danielle Pletka: Hi, I'm Danielle Pletka.

Marc Thiessen: And I'm Marc Thiessen.

Danielle Pletka: Welcome to our podcast, What the Hell Is Going On. Marc, what the hell is going on?

Marc Thiessen: What the hell is going on is that four and a half decades after Ronald Reagan announced the Strategic Defense Initiative, we're finally going to build it. Donald Trump, who has a giant portrait of Ronald Reagan in his Oval Office, which is the one where you see over his Reagan looking over his shoulder every press conference he does in the Oval Office has [announced](https://www.whitehouse.gov/videos/the-golden-dome-missile-defense-shield-2/) that we are building the Golden Dome, and he wants it deployed before he leaves office. And he's marshaling. He put a general in charge of the effort. He's calling on Congress to put it in his big, beautiful bill to fund it, the first tranche of it, and he's going to build it and God bless him. This is one of the best things that Donald Trump has done since he's come back for his second term. I'm all in favor.

Danielle Pletka: Yes. What a shock that is to all of our listeners.

Marc Thiessen: Well, here's the shock. You're in favor too, and you give him credit, don't you? Yes, you do Dany.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know. I hate to do it. Now, listen. Listen, one of the things I like about Donald Trump, and there's a lot, and a growing amount that I don't like about Donald Trump, but one of the things I really like about Donald Trump is he is able to think big and he is able to think unconventionally. And I think those are two hugely important traits in a good leader. And Donald Trump has some stuff going on the other side of the ledger, but when he does these two things, he is at his best, and you do your 10 best at the end of the year, and this is going to be one of them.

Marc Thiessen: 100%.

Danielle Pletka: Because the United States has been fearful and complacent for too long. All of our listeners spent four years with us talking about how Joe Biden had no policy on Iran, he had no policy on China and he was afraid of "escalation" with Russia as if somehow, they were not a two-bit power, and we were not the United States of America. And that period has to end because that invites attacks. And that's really what this is in response to.

Marc Thiessen: Well, what he always said was, we don't want escalation because we don't want Armageddon, right?

Danielle Pletka: Right.

Marc Thiessen: Well, yeah, guess what? If you have a ballistic missile shield that can protect the United States, that takes Armageddon off of Putin's to-do list. You watch how that crippled his foreign policy, his fear of escalation into a nuclear exchange with Russia. What if we were able to shoot down those missiles, or at least enough of them, that Putin would never launch an attack because he didn't think that he could succeed in getting them through? That was the genius of what Ronald Reagan came up with when he proposed SDI, which was to make nuclear weapons obsolete, at least for our adversaries. He wanted to give them the technology so ours would be obsolete too. I'm not sure Trump is thinking that way.

Danielle Pletka: No, let's hope not.

Marc Thiessen: Let's hope not. But our vulnerability, mutually assured destruction, our vulnerability, when you don't have a strong leader in the Oval Office and you have a weak leader like Joe Biden, who by the way, during his entire Senate career opposed ballistic missile defense and did everything he could to thwart it. When you don't have a strong leader, then that becomes a deterrent to doing things conventionally to defend America's interest around the world. And so having a ballistic missile defense not only can protect our country and protect our citizens, but it enables the United States to lead on the world stage without being fearful that one of our adversaries, be it a rogue state or a major power like Russia or China, can threaten Detroit or New York or Los Angeles with nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah, no, listen. I mean, again, you've got to step up to the threat that is, not the threat that you wish existed. And we have been burying our heads in the sand for too long. So Donald Trump is not just talking out of both sides of his mouth. He is also put a request to fund this in the [one big beautiful bill act](https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/1/text). What a dumb name, which in the section 20003, it sounds like a ZIP code, enhancement of Department of Defense Resources for Integrated Air and Missile Defense. While you were speaking, Marc, while your lips were moving, I added the numbers up, $25 billion is in this bill. So this is a big start if they do the right thing with it.

 And a big question I think will be, and we discussed this with our guests, but I think a really critical question is personnel, right? You need the right guy to run this. Neither you nor I know the general who's been put in charge of this, he may be the greatest thing since sliced bread. I don't know. But it requires someone who's willing to break some rules, who's willing to go outside the system and really, really snap heads together in order to get this moving. I hope Donald Trump has his eye on that ball.

Marc Thiessen: Yeah. You know who I would've put in charge of this if he wasn't otherwise occupied with DOGE was Elon Musk. Elon Musk would've been exactly the kind of person you would want to put in charge of kind of effort. The guy who invented a rocket that can land.

Danielle Pletka: Oh my God.

Marc Thiessen: Would be the right person to build a ballistic missile defense. So maybe Elon is too burned by his experience in government and the attacks on Tesla and all the rest of it, but he'd be a great person. But someone like that is what we need, someone from the private sector. But can I also give a shout out to Ronald Reagan in another way?

Danielle Pletka: Yes, please.

Marc Thiessen: Do you remember the controversy? We're both old enough to remember it in real time. Others have studied it in the history books about the Reykjavik Summit.

Danielle Pletka: Oh yeah, of course.

Marc Thiessen: Where Gorbachev offered to eliminate nuclear weapons if only Ronald Reagan would give up SDI and Reagan said, "No."

Danielle Pletka: “Stuff it”

Marc Thiessen: And the whole world said, “What a terrible decision, what a defeat for arms control. What a massive, massive lost opportunity for that for...” Well, I can tell you something. Watching Israel shoot down those Iranian missiles over their country with their Iron Dome, the fact that we have technology now that this could conceivably be initially deployed within three years with the technology that we've developed over the last decades, thank God for Ronald Reagan's decision at Reykjavik to not... He really believed in SDI. People said, "Well, it's a crazy idea. It could never work." Star Wars, they called it, right?

Danielle Pletka: Right.

Marc Thiessen: Pejoratively. But at least it's a good negotiating tool to get arms control agreements. And Ronald Reagan, no, he was serious. He wanted to build a shield to protect the United States from ballistic missile attack. And I believe Donald Trump's going to give it to us. And kudos to Ronald Reagan and his wisdom at Reykjavik.

Danielle Pletka: Your faith in Donald Trump is heartwarming. Let's introduce our guest. Let's introduce our guest.

Marc Thiessen: I have faith in J.D. Crouch.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah, there you go. I have faith in J.D. Crouch as well. J.D. Crouch is our guest, Dr. J.D. Crouch to all of you, currently serves as the president and CEO of the United Service Organizations, which is the USO for those of us plebs who know the USO so well and admire it so much. He had a distinguished diplomatic career as a leader in national security serving Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, George W. Bush's Assistant Secretary of Defense for international Security, principal advisor to the Secretary of Defense on Policy for Missile Defense, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security, and advisor of the U.S. delegation on nuclear and arms space talks. He is the man. He's also a senior advisor to our fellow think tank CSIS. And I'm simply delighted we were able to get him for this.

Marc Thiessen: He's one of my favorite people in the world. I traveled the world with J.D. Crouch and the Bush administration. I was in Afghanistan in Herat with him. I was sitting across the table from the Russian Defense Minister in Moscow when they were negotiating the Moscow Treaty with J.D Crouch. This is a man who knows what he's talking about and great friend of ours. And here's our interview.

Marc Thiessen: J.D., welcome to the podcast.

J.D.: Oh, it's great to be here.

Marc Thiessen: It's so awesome to have you on, and it's so awesome to have you entering the public discourse again after serving our nation's military so well, with the running the USO. I worked closely with you in the Bush administration, s o I know that you're one of the most brilliant foreign policy thinkers. And so love to have you in the debate again. And I know that one of your areas of expertise is ballistic missile defense. We both come from the Rumsfeld Pentagon. And Don Rumsfeld was the head of the Ballistic Missile Threat Commission that raised the alarm bell many, many years ago. We still don't have a big beautiful shield over the United States, but Donald Trump's going to build one. Just first question. Is this a realistic goal to build a Golden Dome over the United States? Can we actually build an impenetrable shield that will protect us from all the ballistic missile threats that are out there? Or is this-

J.D.: No.

Marc Thiessen: ... sort of a fantasy?

J.D.: Well, it's certainly not a fantasy. I think the President's objective is the right one. I mean, I don't know that he's ever said perfect. Maybe he has, but nothing can ever be perfect. But can the technology work? Absolutely. In fact, it's old technology, right? I mean, so to go back, even before Rumsfeld. I briefed President H.W. Bush on a program that included a space-based missile defense called Brilliant Pebbles. This was in 1991. That's 35 years ago. If you think about the technological advancements that we've had since then, the ability, and frankly, the ballistic missile threat has not advanced as fast as many of those other technological advancements have. And so we are absolutely able to build a very effective multi-layered defense against all kinds of threats. The question of, "Can it work?" Absolutely, it can work. Can I make one more point though?

Marc Thiessen: Yeah.

J.D.: Everybody says, "The other thing is it doesn't have to work to work," because what you're trying to do is you're trying to stop a major power like China or Russia from launching a disarming attack against you. They have to calculate getting through that defense. And if it's not a 100% effective, it doesn't matter. It is 100% effective at rendering their attack ineffective. And so it bolsters deterrence, amazingly. And then if you do have a few missiles shot at you, the North Korean scenario, things like that, those you can easily, easily deal with. So absolutely, I think the President's objective is right.

Danielle Pletka: So first of all, J.D., it is such a pleasure and an honor to have you on. Marc and I-

J.D.: Yeah.

Danielle Pletka: ... are huge J.D. Crouch fans for many years, and you're a friend too. So-

J.D.: Likewise.

Danielle Pletka: ... even better. So I want to, first, do a missile defense for dummies exercise because-

J.D.: That's right.

Danielle Pletka: Let's call me the dummy here-

Marc Thiessen: Yeah, missile defense for Dany.

Danielle Pletka: Missile defense for Dany, as Marc would say, interchangeable with dummies. J.D. thinks I'm not wading into that. So Donald Trump looks at Iron Dome, right? This is obviously his inspiration. But, of course, Donald Trump loves everything to be golden, golden visas, golden furniture, golden airplanes, one at a Golden Dome. So Iron Dome is-

Marc Thiessen: Golden Dome is soft. Iron is hard.

Danielle Pletka: Good point.

Marc Thiessen: He has softened the dome already just by the name change.

Danielle Pletka: Okay. Well, you can make gold harder by adulterating it with garbage. So, let us talk about Iron Dome in Israel. Iron Dome is incredible. It has been very successful, not perfect, but very successful in defending the State of Israel. The State of Israel is bigger than the state of Rhode Island. It's home to 10 million people. Not big either. How do we take that sort of technology and make it work for America? And when you tell us the answer to that, talk to us also about how Israel's making it work for them.

J.D.: So as you know, most of the technologies that the Israelis are using are basically what we would call ground-based defense, right? So you've got a missile being shot at them, and they're shooting up at it from Israeli territory. And their targeting is done from there. Obviously, they may have what are called queuing assets where they can see things further afield so they can bring their interceptors to bear. And they've got a multi-layer defense in the sense that they've got more than one interceptor, right, to do this. They even recently are using lasers to deal with drones and things like that.

 Now, the United States is a bigger country, but it's also facing potentially threats that are intercontinental in range and some more sophisticated technologies than-

Marc Thiessen: Not Mexico and Canada.

J.D.: It's not Mexico and Canada. And so-

Danielle Pletka: I'm not sure about Canada.

Marc Thiessen: Yeah.

J.D.: ... the typical way of doing that is doing what's called a layered defense. And again, you go back to the Reagan SDI program, the so-called Global Protection against Limited Strikes program that H.W. Bush talked about, and move forward. The idea was you have multiple layers. And the key to, I think, all of it is going to be something in space. So something the Israelis don't have. And space-based defense is absolutely the most effective and cost-effective way to defend against large, sophisticated threats. You still need some ground-based stuff, and that's going to be important. But as in the missile defense 101, think about it this way. You've got a boosting rocket from a radar perspective that looks like a flying burning barn. The reentry vehicle that's coming in is cold, stealthy, and very small. And so what's easier to hit? So from space, you can get at those boosting rockets. So a lot of other advantages to that. And so that's why some element of that missile defense system has got to include space.

 And people will say, "Well, you'll militarize space." Well, first of all, our adversaries are already militarizing space, and if you just look at the recent testimony that the head of the Space Force talked about what the Russians and the Chinese are doing. And even if you have a ground-based defense, where are the sensors that are going to detect all that stuff? They're in space. So unfortunately, the horses are out of the barn on that one.

Danielle Pletka: So let me follow up for a sec. I think part of the problem is, actually, the imagery is wrong. This is not really a dome or an umbrella in the sense that there's something right overhead protecting us. This is really something that's focused on the point of exit from our enemies' space. Can you talk a little bit more so people understand, first of all, about what that testimony was? In other words, what's the fight going on in space right now and what do you think it means? And second, does this address the kinds of threats that Marc and I actually have talked about on the podcast before, not just ICBMs, but now these hypersonic missiles and things like that? So sort of two follow-up questions for you.

J.D.: Sure. Well, we have seen the Russians in space for a long time developing co-orbital ASAT capabilities. Those are techniques to destroy other satellites. We've seen them testing laser type things both from the ground and potentially even in space. We're now seeing the Chinese testing these kinds of capabilities, highly maneuverable space vehicles and things. This is all in open testimony in front of, I think, the Armed services Committee. So in fact, whether we are racing or not, there's a space race going on because the Chinese and the Russians understand that if you dominate that high ground, it gives you enormous potential to impact what's going on on the earth, right? Not only just the sensing capability, but eventually, the ability to use space as a way to bombard the earth.

 And so that's part of that struggle. And we could go back to Agincourt and say to the French, "We really don't want to develop those longbows." But the fact that they didn't had a disastrous effect. So I think we have to stay in that space domain and in the space military competition in an effective way. And I think we've got the capabilities to do that.

 You talked about hypersonic. So what is a hypersonic? Well, hypersonic is basically a ballistic missile that goes up just like a traditional one, but it has a fairly truncated access into orbit, and then it deploys what's called a boost-glide vehicle. And that's a vehicle that comes in very rapidly and has maneuvering capability. So again, back to my space-based defenses, it still has to boost to get the speed. It has to boost. It may be less than, let's say, the 300 seconds of an ICBM booster. It may be 150 seconds, but it still has to boost. And in that time, it is vulnerable to space-based defenses.

 Now, and the Golden Dome concept, they're talking about investing in interceptors that are specific ground-based, that are specifically designed to go after these boost-glide vehicles, if they get through the first layer. But I would argue that that first layer is critical. And I'm emphasizing this because there's going to be people who say the opposite. They're going to say, "Do it all on the ground. And if we need it, we go into space." And my message would be, we've tried that several times, it's not working. We've got to finally, pardon the expression, bite the bullet and deploy the next generation of Brilliant Pebble. We'll call it genius sand.

Marc Thiessen: I love that. Can you just draw us a picture for an American who's watching this? So North Korea, China, Russia launches a ballistic missile at the United States, and we've got this system deployed. What happens next? What are the vulnerable points? What weapons are we using? How are we taking it out? If one fails, what is the backup?

J.D.: Right. So assuming you had a multi-layer defense deployed, like I've been describing. The first engagement would likely be your space-based layer. It's possible that something is at sea, or by the way, it's possible that one of our allies might have a missile that could engage. So, for example, you may recall, Marc, that one of the ideas we had during the second Bush administration was to deploy ground-based interceptors in Poland. And we never did that.

 The new administration didn't want to do that, but those missiles would've been in position to defend the United States against an Iranian ICBM. So you've got far forward either deployed forces or space-based forces that would be the first line of engagement. And one of the nice things about the space-based missile defense is that, by and large, if you've got a boosting rocket and you intercept it with that, guess where all the debris falls. Back on the country that shot it at you, all right? Not necessarily always, but in many cases, right?

Marc Thiessen: Yep.

J.D.: So that now, let's say-

Marc Thiessen: In space, what are they firing?

J.D.: That’s a great question. A lot of people worry that this is like nuclear weapons in space. It doesn't even have an explosive device. It destroys the other thing by kinetic energy. It just runs into it. It's two cars hitting each other at orbital velocity. You can imagine the impact of each one's going 15,000 miles an hour. There's nothing left, right?

Marc Thiessen: Yeah.

J.D.: And so even that-

Marc Thiessen: It’s kinetic, it's not a laser or something like that. This is a actual-

J.D.: Completely kinetic. Now, lasers are an option in space as well, but they have some significant, I think... From a developmental standpoint, they're further down the road. They have some advantages, but I think they also have some vulnerabilities.

Marc Thiessen: I thought Israel pioneered that, that it's the Jewish space lasers that were starting all the fires, right?

Danielle Pletka: Yes, that's right.

Marc Thiessen: Okay. That's all right. Just as an aside. All right.

Danielle Pletka: Just as-

J.D.: I know nothing about that, but-

Dany Pletka: That's right, playing ignorant.

Marc Thiessen: Anyway. So-

J.D.: Yeah. Now, let's say it gets through that. Then you've got ground-based interceptors. And one of the things you'll remember, Marc, that during the Bush administration, we got out of the ABM Treaty. And getting out of that treaty freed the country to be able to integrate all of its missile defense technologies. Some of our best radars are actually out on ships, the Aegis radar that sits on destroyers, cruisers. We've even deployed them on land now in Romania and places like that. And those things can see small objects in space. And so they would direct interceptors, again, kinetic, no warhead, out into space and smack into that warhead and destroy it. That's in the so-called mid-course. So we have a boost, a mid-course, and then we have a terminal phase.

 Let's say it gets through that. Now, it's coming into the atmosphere. It's coming very fast, very hot. And at that point, you can have an interceptor like THAAD or even potentially Patriot that can be used depending upon the target, but that's the worst place to defend is the terminal phase. It's hard. And so you don't want to get there, but you can. And in that case, you might use... The Patriot has a warhead on it, but it's not a nuclear warhead. It's just an explosive warhead similar to a few hundred pounds of TNT. And there are other ways, but those are the main ways that maybe you think about a layered defense where you're attacking in all courses of flight.

Marc Thiessen: And then what about a cruise missile that doesn't leave the atmosphere? Can space-based weapons take that out too?

J.D.: Depending upon how high it's flying, there's a possibility, but probably not in most cases. You would need some other kind of air defense, and that's where something like Patriot would be very useful. Or like the Israelis developed a system called Arrow that was capable of doing those sorts of things. So you still need a theater layer, right? And you need that also because if you're going to have expeditionary American forces going into places, they're going to need some organic air defense. Those defenses look more like the defenses would use to shoot down airplanes.

Danielle Pletka: So one of the things that I think is good for us to think about in a general sense is this warning that we have been increasingly agitating about, which is the cooperation between our enemies, what Marc and I still doggedly call the axis of evil, right? And we're seeing this in theater in Ukraine, but we're also seeing stepped-up cooperation between the Chinese and the Iranians, the Chinese and the Pakistanis, the Chinese and the Russians, the North Koreans and the Russians, the Russians and the Iranians. There's a whole world of naughty going on out there. And unfortunately, the battlefield experience that we're seeing the Ukrainians garner and this drone attack that just happened is, I think, really amazing evidence of that expertise. Learning in the field is also being used to understand better how we will defend ourselves. Can you talk a little bit about, and you can call it the axis of evil or not, but what these guys are up to and why this represents a greater danger than perhaps the one we faced over the last few decades?

J.D.: Yeah. Well, I would argue that the defining alignment of the pre-World War II period was the German-Soviet alignment that really started after World War I in 1918 and really lasted fairly continuously. And, of course, it culminated in the Hitler-Ribbentrop Pact, which was something that... So if you fast-forward to the today with your reemergence of normal great power politics, I think the Sino-Russian alignment is the defining change in our international environment that we really haven't come to grips with yet. And we've wanted to believe that the Chinese and the Russians don't like each other. And that's true, they don't like each other, any more that the Soviets and the Germans didn't like each other. But it did not stop them from a very high level of cooperation. And I think when the histories are written about this, assuming we get to write them, we're going to look back and see this cooperation extending far further back even than Xi and Putin, although I think it's definitely been intensified.

 Our old mentor, Don Rumsfeld, loved to talk about, there was known knowns and known unknowns and unknown unknowns. I think there's definitely unknown unknowns in the level of cooperation. We keep seeing this get peeled back, Dany, where people say, "No, the Chinese aren't really helping the Russians on the battlefield." Well, then we find out that, "No, actually they are." And then we get denial about, "Does the Chinese Communist Party know about it?" Right? As though the Chinese Communist Party doesn't take notice of things like this.

 My favorite one is Putin. Putin actually goes right before the invasion of Ukraine. He goes to Beijing for the Olympics, right? I'm sure he was just there to attend the gymnastics games and stuff like that. Actually, he didn't go to the games. He met with the Politburo. And what were they talking about? Do you think they were trading stories about their grandkids? I mean, no, they were talking about the upcoming invasion of Ukraine. There is no way Putin was going to do that without China's acquiescence. It's too risky, right? In the same way that Hitler needed the Soviet-Ribbentrop or the Hitler-Stalin Pact to invade France.

 So I don't know if that answers your question. I think the level of cooperation is much deeper than our IC is seeing. And I think that the other minor powers that are in that central orbit of the Sino-Russian alignment, those guys are all taking advantage of this both for their own national interests, but also, in support of what China and Russia are doing. And then that raises the question, "Well, what do they want to do?"

Danielle Pletka: Right. So I mean, two questions for you. One, what do they want to do? And two, one of the things that I know you pay attention to and we pay a lot of attention to is the downstream effects of this, right? Where if you hark back to Desert Storm in the first Iraq war, we were talking about the first outing of the Patriot missile and Saddam Hussein having those scud seas, right? Those dumb can't aim them missiles. Now, it's not just that the bad guys don't have scud seas, but have much more sophisticated attack and defense surface-to-air, but that they are providing them. So we see that Hezbollah was using precision-guided munitions against Israel. We see that the Houthis now have turnkey factories where they're producing precision-guided munitions. Talk a little bit about what the danger is there, and also, what the bad guys want to do with this stuff.

J.D.: Yeah. Well, just parenthetically, I'll add, at the end of the Gulf War, I was in the Pentagon, and we did an analysis of, if we'd had Brilliant Pebbles, what would we be unable to do with it vis-a-vis those scud attacks? And given that we ran the actual trajectories against a baseline pebbles constellation, and the conclusion, we could have shot over 90% of them out of the sky.

Danielle Pletka: So cool.

J.D.: That was back in 91. So technology gets out, but I think this is more than technology getting out. This is cooperation, this is trading, this is diversifying supply chains. If you're a Russian and you're thinking about, "Where am I going to get stuff that I need? Yeah, why not Iran? Why not North Korea? Why not China? I need these things and I need them now." And so broadly, yes, this has been happening for a long time, actually. I mean, this is not the beginning. If you think about what are the origins of North Korea's missile program, we've long felt that there were other countries that were helping develop those technologies and enhance them.

 And so now, I don't think the Russians and the Chinese view co-proliferation the way we do. I think they view it differently. I think they say, "Proliferation can be good and proliferation can be bad. If my enemies proliferate, that's bad. If my friends proliferate, that's good." And so they're willing to share these technologies and help proliferate them. And now, I don't know that China and Russia have an end state, but I certainly know this. It has always been Russian policy as is the most expansionist nation on earth, right? It has always been Russian policy to try to dominate the rimlands of Eurasia. And I think the Chinese feel the same way. If they can create essentially a world island in which the United States has to ask permission to have access, that would be a very satisfying world for Putin and Xi. Now, it's a long way off, and it doesn't necessarily have to get there through some kind of military conquest like the Chinese or the Japanese and the Germans during World War II. It can get there, essentially, where people understand where their bread's buttered, if I can use that analogy.

Marc Thiessen: Let's talk about the question of speed in deploying this versus advanced technology, right? So Trump has set a goal of this being deployed before he leaves office. So we're talking three, three and a half years at least getting this up and running. That would argue that you're going to be relying primarily on existing legacy technology, 30, 40 years old technology, things that have been in development by big contractors. There's some people who are saying, "Well, the missile threat is going to accelerate over the next 10 years with all these advances and hypersonics and other things, and we should really be turning to the Palantirs and the SpaceX’s and these advanced companies to design new things to take this stuff out." Where do you fall on the legacy technology versus the innovation question and the speed versus looking over the horizon and how the threat's going to develop? Or should we do both?

J.D.: If the President asked me that question, right? I would say, "Mr. President, if you leave the normal procurement system to itself, you're going to be disappointed. And if you look back at your predecessor-"

Marc Thiessen: Like Air Force One and how quickly they develop that, you're going to love the Golden Dome, right?

J.D.: Yeah. Well, leaving that one aside. If you look back at, let's just say, the global war on terror, almost every one of the major innovations and systems that was deployed outside the procurement system, right? All the way down to little small technical things, but all the way up to big MRAPs and stuff like that, if they'd gone through the normal process, we'd still be going through the normal process. So that would be point one. So you're going to need some kind of procurement authority. A little bit, you need a Leslie Groves. I mean, right? You need somebody who built the atomic bomb, who can drive the process, who can move resources around, who can get stuff done.

 Second thing I would say is you absolutely need to rely on the private sector, and the SpaceXes and the Andurils and people like that. I mean, again, I have no investment in any of that, but I think it's critical that we take advantage of what they know how to do.

 Go back to my space-based layer, and I'll give you an example. One of the biggest problems back in 1990 was we'd never built thousands of satellites before. Guess who has. Elon Musk. People said, "You could never operate a constellation of 2,000 satellites." He's got 7,000 satellites, right? And he's figured out how to put them into lower Earth orbit and drive the cost in then-year dollars down from $50,000 a kilogram to $2,000 a kilogram.

 So the ability to use some of the AI, some of the shrunken electronics, some of the new power systems, all that comes out of the private sector, and that's what has to go into building a new genius sand interceptor, right? I mean, it really ought to start there and then focus on the second question, which is getting from that development to fast-rate production. This country's done this before. We put a thousand ICBMs in the ground in three and a half years. But the guy, Bernard Schriever, who was a colonel back then and became a four-star general, was basically given unlimited authority to go do it and get it done. So I would say it's an authority's question and harness the private sector are the right ways to do it.

Danielle Pletka: Right. I couldn't agree with you more. I mean, that's the shame of what happened with Elon Musk is that someone who is so capable of thinking outside the box, his reputation has really been damaged. And I suspect that his desire to work with the US government is probably more limited than it was before his adventures in 2025.

Marc Thiessen: Okay. So when Ronald Reagan came out with this idea, a strategic defense initiative, the idea was essentially a Golden Dome over the United States. We were going to build an impenetrable shield to protect the United States. His goal was to make nuclear weapons obsolete, right? And then the Cold War ended, and we sort of limited our scope down to tactical, "We're going to shoot down. We're just focused on rogue missiles. We're going to put these interceptors in Poland and Czechoslovakia. But they have nothing to do with Russia. They couldn't protect us against a Russian missile attack. This is just for onesies and twosies from rogue states." And now, aren't we back to Reagan's vision? And the original idea behind this, isn't this what we're looking at?

J.D.: Well, People will focus on the technology question, "Can it work?" I think you're asking the policy question that will actually lead us in a good place or not, and that is, what do we want to defend against? Right? So we have to go out and say something the Bush administration that we worked in was not willing to say is we're going to defend against Russian missiles. And we may not be perfect, but we're going to get better at it, and we're going to try to undermine their free ride of being able to attack the United States of America at will. That's not exactly a God-given right.

 And so I think we've got to get the policy piece right, and there will be resistance to that. And the resistance will come from some of the normal quarters you might see in terms of the arms control community and that sort of thing. But it'll also come from inside the Pentagon, because why? Where's the money coming from? Whose budget is going to be cut-

Marc Thiessen: Yeah.

J.D.: ... to fund this? Right? And look, I understand, if I'm the chief of staff of the Army, the Navy, or the Air Force, I have to have capable armies, navies, and air forces. Where does this fit? Now, again, President Trump, in his first term, created something called the Space Force, and he did it, I think, in part for this reason that there has to be an institutional player. So one of the things that has to happen is there has to be some juice given to that institutional player. There has to be some strong support, right? To say, "All right. This is a chief of staff of a space force that's an equal player in the Pentagon debate over resources, and we're going to have to find the resources to do that." So it's not going to be easy. But yes, the short answer to your question is we're probably back facing that question. The Russians have what? Four or 500 ICBMs. The Chinese have got 300 or so. Those are big numbers, but they're not impossible to solve.

Marc Thiessen: So we're going to have the whole mutually assured destruction, Matt is nuts debate from the 80s all over again is what you're saying now.

J.D.: We could. There could be advocates who say, "The mutual assured destruction argument is we're safer if we're more vulnerable."

Marc Thiessen: Yeah. Nobody believes that anymore.

Danielle Pletka: I think there are more-

J.D.: No-

Danielle Pletka: ... people, Marc, who believe that.

J.D.: ... I'm actually thinking you may be right. I mean, I'm thinking that there's going to be a core, maybe even on both sides of the aisle, that sort of step back for this and say, "No, we need..." There'll be quibbles about what it ought to be and how big it ought to be and all that. But there are going to be at least some supporters on both sides of the aisle for this.

Danielle Pletka: I hope you're right.

Marc Thiessen: Let me ask you about this strike that we just saw. The Ukrainians launched this very innovative strike that apparently took out like 30% of Russia's strategic bombers by taking drones into the country in flatbed trucks, building these wooden huts, which were remotely... I mean, it's just one of the most brilliant attacks. We're going to be learning so much from the Ukrainian war on Russia that's going to inform the future of warfare. But the Golden Dome can't stop that, can it?

J.D.: Not drones on flatbed trucks. Absolutely not. By the way, I'll give you a little vignette. I was in Kremlin on September 11th, 2001. And we were sitting across from the Russians and we were negotiating over missile defense and strategic weapons and all that kind of stuff. And we had a press conference afterwards. And about the time of the press conference, the first tower goes down. And then just after that, the second tower goes down. And I can't remember. It was one of the reporters asked us a question that said, "What's the point of having missile defense if you can be attacked this way?" And my response to that is, it's like saying, "Well, why lock your front door if somebody can come in the back?" Right? I mean, no, you've got to have solutions to both. You've got to take into account those as real threats.

 The fact that a single weapon system or grouping of weapon systems can't handle every threat you've got is not an argument against being able to defend against those things, which really need to be defended against. This is a vulnerability though. There's no question about it. I mean, they've proven it. I mean, if you can do it in Russia, think how much easier it would be to do it in the United States. And so when you think about Chinese surveillance balloons and floating over missile fields and all that kind of stuff, you wonder, "Has that stuff been surveyed already? Are there people thinking about that problem?" One way to neutralize a boosting ICBM... We talked about boost phase. What if you have a 30-06 rifle and you're sitting next to a missile silo when it comes out, or a shaped charge or something like that? So there's high-tech and there's low tech, and you got to deal with both of them.

 Danielle Pletka: And there's deterrence. At the end of the day, that's the other thing that all of the Strategic defense initiative, the Brilliant Pebbles, all of these brilliant American innovations were deterrents. And part of what's happened over the last decade plus is that our deterrence has eroded in a very serious way, as has her ability, frankly, to invest in R&D. I mean, we're all old enough to remember this. Everybody ridiculed Ronald Reagan. I remember being at The Heritage Foundation in the early 1980s, right? And just listening to a defense of this and Edward Teller talking about this as absolutely every major newspaper attacked these ideas. But as much as I hate to give Donald Trump credit, I think that this is the kind of, I'll use the communist term, great leap forward that is required to restore deterrence. We need the innovation that comes, not just from this idea, but from developing it further, don't you think?

J.D.: Absolutely. And so if you go back and look at the Nuclear Posture Review that I was involved in writing back in 2001, we created a new triad. Remember, the triad used to be ICBMs, submarine launch ballistic missiles, and bombers, right? We created a new triad. And one leg of that triad was defense. And it has an enormous deterrent effect because the attacker can't have any confidence in this attack. I used to say, "What we want is, when the colonel in the morning comes into President Xi or President Putin, and he's asked the question, 'What's your confidence in the attack?' We want the colonel to say, 'Not that high.' And if we can do that every morning, right? Then we win," right? So I think deterrence is key. The Golden Dome doesn't have to be perfect to work perfectly.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah. No, I think that's absolutely brilliant. I think that's totally true. So we've kept you as usual longer than we promised.

J.D.: This is fun for me.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah. Well, it's great fun for us too. And that's why we always lie about how long we're going to keep people for half an hour.

Marc Thiessen: “Keep people half an hour.” It's never happened once.

J.D.: Yeah.

Danielle Pletka: Almost literally, except for that one guy who spoke the entire half hour. Don't mention his name, Marc. But I want to ask you my separate exit question because I think it's hugely-

J.D.: Sure.

Danielle Pletka: ... important. So you've lived a life of service, which I think is profoundly honorable and something to really model for younger generations in the country. At the USO, you have talked about national service and about a commitment to doing things in public service, not necessarily the military. There are many, many ways to serve your country, including working in the White House, including working in Congress. Lots and lots of ways. I look at military recruiting. I look at attitudes. I look at campuses. Marc and I have spent a lot of time talking about campus antisemitism and all of these problems over the last year and a half. Are you optimistic about service in our next generation, or are you worried?

J.D.: Yeah. Well, you have to worry, I think, when you look at what the educational system has produced, right? I mean, in a way, it's hard to blame... And I don't blame the young folks because they're reflecting, right? What they've been taught, and not just what they've been taught, but how they've been taught. It seems to me like there's less critical thinking skills being conveyed, and more... And I'll give an example of that, which really you'll laugh. Back to Brilliant Pebbles. Do you know where it came from?

Danielle Pletka: No.

J.D.: It was a guy named Edward Teller. You may remember him.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah.

J.D.: Dr. Edward Teller. And he was going back and forth on this, "Does space-based missile defense work?" So he took two of his most brilliant students, Lowell Wood from Lawrence Livermore and Dr. Greg Canavan from Los Alamos. And he said, "All right, you guys. One guy, build a space-based defense that works. The other guy, attack it and kill it and destroy it, and just keep doing that." And that's how they evolved Brilliant Pebbles to the point where the guy who had been given the destroy mission put his hands up and said, "I lose." And so that's critical thinking skills.

 We're now taught what to think. We're not taught how to unpack problems and that sort of thing. So I think if we can get back to there and shameless plug... I mean, I think schools like Hillsdale, places like that are creating young minds that are doing that. And it doesn't take that many young minds to make a difference. So I remain optimistic because I think people will be drawn to that in the end. But it's a tough way back. It's been a long time since we've had an educational system that didn't always have the right answer that it conveyed to people. And as you mentioned it, you see it with the support for the last October's terrorist attack that killed all those people. It's just incomprehensible to me.

Marc Thiessen: My exit question since Dany started us on this track. Are you worried about the lack of patriotism in the tech industry? So you have great companies like Palantir, and Alex Karp, he says, "My reason for living, my reason for getting up every day is to defend Western civilization and use my technological talent to defend Western civilization." But then you've got these protests at some of these major companies where they're like, "We don't want to work for the defense industry. We don't want to rebuild weapons." There seems to be a whole sector of the Silicon Valley that just doesn't want to rally around the country and defend the country. They think that that's evil and that they shouldn't be doing that.

J.D.: Yeah.

Marc Thiessen: What do you think of the impact there?

J.D.: I think the leaders of those companies, by and large, have had an epiphany over the last few years. And it's going to require them to lead their people back to this. And I think they've had that epiphany for a couple of reasons. One is, they realize that the basis on which they can do their business requires an international system where the rule of law has some meaning, right? And a second reason is I think a lot of them were thinking that China was the big bet. And now they realize it's not, that what China is is the place that you get your technology stolen and replicated.

 And then I do believe many of those leaders are genuinely patriotic in the way that they look at it. So yeah, they're dealing with workforces that are diverse and, in some respects, reflect some of the stuff that's going on in the universities that Dany and I were just talking about. They've got the same set of problems. It's going to take leadership. They're going to have to stand up and make the argument and they're going to have to enforce it. And that's the hard part. But again, I think there's just way more patriotic Americans out there than people... They tend to be quiet. And so, again, I'm not a pessimist on that in the long run, but the short run is going to be difficult.

Marc Thiessen: Is there a Golden Dome in three years?

J.D.: Probably not just because of how long it takes to do those things. But I think you could get it, I think to the point, if you really got serious about the testing. And I said, I think the President, he has to put somebody who really thinks, "If we don't perfect this technology in the next three years, we're going to lose the war." He needs somebody like that, right? Like Groves to drive that forward. If he does that, I think you can get very close to actually putting up some of the first stuff that you need. But it won't be fully constructed and fully completed. That would be my guess. But the President is the CEO. He knows that if you ask for it in three years, you might get it in four. So he may ask for it in two years and then to get it in three. So we'll see.

Danielle Pletka: J.D., thank you for your service as always. But thank you for being our friend and for doing missile defense for dummies for Dany Pletka. And-

Marc Thiessen: Oh, come on, Dany.

Danielle Pletka: Yeah. Well, what's your point?

Marc Thiessen: And missile defense for smart people like me.

Danielle Pletka: As opposed to smart people like Marc, of course. And there you have our valedictory point. Thanks, J.D. It's so great to have you.

Marc Thiessen: Thanks, J.D.

J.D.: Great to see you. All right.

Danielle Pletka: Okay. So Marc, both you and I brought up Ukraine and we actually both brought up the same thing, which is this really pretty spectacular and innovative Ukrainian drone attack that hit Russia's long-range bombers, which they've been using to attack Ukraine. This is the kind of thing that we've come to expect from the Ukrainians, but it is a good reminder to us as well that our enemies are out there. they're learning. They're getting better. They're practicing on the field. The Chinese are watching what the Russians are doing, the North Koreans are watching what the Russians are doing, the Iranians are out there. And I can't help but feel that we still don't take this threat seriously enough. What do you think?

Marc Thiessen: I think it's true. I think there’s an unholy alliance between those four countries that you named with the other associated smaller entities out there. And yeah, it's a serious threat. But we've come full circle from Ronald... We were talking about this with J.D. that when Ronald Reagan came up with this idea, the goal was to stop a Soviet all-out nuclear strike on the United States, and at least give them the uncertainty of their ability to succeed in that. And then the Cold War ended, and we were trying to have good relations with China, have good relations with Russia. And so we said, "Oh, well, this isn't aimed at stopping you. It's aimed at stopping Iran. It's aimed at stopping North Korea."

 "We know we can't build a shield to defend against a massive Soviet-Russian attack or a Chinese attack, but we can stop onesies and twosies from these rogue regimes and that's what our goal is." It's like, "Well, no, now we're back to square one." No, I shouldn't say square one. Now we're back to the original objective, which is to stop a massive nuclear attack by Russia, by China. That's the right objective. And by the way, that can also stop a North Korean or Iranian nuclear attack as well. So we're back to where we should have been from the beginning. We're back to Ronald Reagan's vision for this and it's the right vision for the country.

Danielle Pletka: And on that uplifting note of the right vision for the country based on our Ron-Con ideals.

Marc Thiessen: There you go. We're bringing it.

Danielle Pletka: We're going to make it a thing like fetch.

Marc Thiessen: We're going to make Fetch a thing. Ron-Con.

Danielle Pletka: Ron-Con.

Marc Thiessen: We're Ron-Cons.

Danielle Pletka: There you go. Everybody, let us know what you think. Let us know if you have ideas, reactions, and thanks for being with us.

Marc Thiessen: Take care. See you next week.